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Delta memories and Delta days: facets of ladies' lives as revealed to a southern daughter

Susan E. Probasco

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, sproba1@lsu.edu

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DELTA MEMORIES AND DELTA DAYS:
FACETS OF LADIES' LIVES AS
REVEALED TO A SOUTHERN DAUGHTER

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by
Susan E. Probasco
B.A., Clemson University, 1997
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Abstract

The Arkansas Delta is a land considered by many to be devoid of beauty and richness of life. However, to a daughter who was the youngest child of the youngest child of a youngest child that was born in the Delta, the region is beautiful, enhanced by the observations of the lives of the women she observed there. An ethnography of the everyday lives of white, middle-class southern women in a small Arkansas Delta town seeks to communicate some of the richness and beauty of their lives, as well as other aspects of culture illustrative of southern culture in general, and Delta culture in particular.

Chapter 1: Introduction

There are many reasons that I chose to research and write a thesis about the Arkansas Delta. The Delta is the home of my family; most of that family is gone now, resting at the Mt. Carmel cemetery across the street from my grandparents' house in Sweetwater. The Delta is the birthplace of my mother, and the mythic land of my childhood dreams. The women that I have worked with over the last five years are responsible for the enculturation of my mother, and, in many ways for my own enculturation. I can see in myself so many of their traits: their voices in my own, their actions through my hands. It seems natural to me that in choosing a culture to learn from and pour my heart and energy into, it should be the one that I already so treasure.

I have always written stories about the Delta and my family. In the process of preparing this thesis, I have found pieces that I wrote eleven, fifteen, and more years ago. As I am now twenty-seven, this region has been communicating through me in written form for a large portion of my life.

I have always loved the Delta. Every summer I could not wait until I got to leave Little Rock for a few weeks and go down to south Arkansas to get to be alone with my Grandma. I always had a good time. I was never bored, and there was so much to learn from my grandmother.

It was my love of the Delta that started to pull me toward this project during my senior year at Clemson University. I was taking a sociology course titled "Developing Societies." One day our professor showed us a film, which he said he hoped would really make us think.

The film was called “The Third World in the United States,” and the subject was life in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta. The film offered every negative portrayal of Delta life, balanced by none of the beauty, none of the sweetness, none of the rich culture. It dealt only in quantifiable demographics. It was not long into the film that I found myself sitting up very straight in my chair, looking surreptitiously around the darkened classroom to see if anyone else appeared upset. No one did. I was offended, outraged, drawing myself up stiff as a poker in my agitation.

I breathed in every negative minute of that experience, and I’ve stored it inside, and used it over the years that I’ve been working on my thesis. They didn’t have it right. They missed so much with their statistics and their search for the ills of rural Delta life. I determined then and there to tell my side of it. I thought I could make people see that although there may be ugliness and poverty, that there is also infinite beauty and richness in the Delta. Creating beauty out of ruins has become a habit for southerners (Sullivan 1972). I can only begin to hint at the beauty with my humble efforts, but I have seen, in the last few years, others like me in Arkansas, who are determined to convey the image of the Arkansas Delta as multi-faceted, rich with detail, not flat like the landscape. The Delta Cultural Center in Helena, Arkansas, is full of scholars solely committed to highlighting the lives and stories of the Delta people. This search for beauty in unexpected places is nicely summed up by Anne Goodwyn Jones (2001) when she says, “...but such are the ways of the southern¹ intellectual, always seeing the silk purses in, well, pig’s feet, and finding the truth in a ‘curious specimen’” (31).

¹ For a number of years now, it appears that there has been a debate among intellectuals of the South as to whether “southern” should be capitalized in literary discourse. In the Spring 2002 issue of *Southern Cultures* the debate is highlighted in the Letters to the Editor section. It is the opinion of the editors at *Southern Cultures* that “southerners don’t need the formality of a capital S” (2). Furthermore, the

In addition to my sociology class at Clemson, there were other experiences that forged in me the need to explore the culture of my family. Having been raised southern, I never had any cause to doubt my place in southern culture until I came up against one of my sorority sisters at Clemson. Melanie was from Charleston, which is undeniably the bastion of all southernness, in her opinion, and in mine as well. I adore Charleston, my husband and I lived there for the first year of our marriage, and we plan to move back with all haste. No one ever said anything negative about Arkansas to us while we lived there; in fact, a surprisingly large number of people we met had either lived in Arkansas themselves, or had relatives who lived there. But Charleston is not the whole South; it is only a small part of the rich diversity offered by the South in its entirety.

But the seed had already been planted in my mind by Melanie.... “You’re from Arkansas,” Melanie said. “Yes,” I answered, wondering where this was going. “Do you consider yourself southern?” she questioned. Me—with my natural accent that my northern-born daddy tried unsuccessfully to cure me of for about twenty years before he gave up; me—with my secret, will-guard-to-the-death, all-time best recipe for fried okra; me—with my childhood playing along side the Mississippi River. I felt naked, like she was trying to strip away the mantle of my culture that had always enveloped me.

“Wellll....yessssss.....” I drawled, “I do, why?” Perhaps seeing a little bit of blood in

editors state that they “believe that truly southern southerners haven’t needed capitalization since the early days of the confederacy. They simply understand and embody these words, confidently, without need of outside reinforcement or false esteem. We’ll leave the gratuitous capitalization for other publications, including those that are still trying to figure out just what makes a southerner southern” (2).

Throughout the course of my research I have found that many of those whose work I cite choose not to capitalize the S in southern, as well. As I am writing about culture, a tacit aspect of one’s life that is simply lived in every day, I too choose not to capitalize, especially as I am discussing southern culture as an aspect of my own life. On those occasions when I may step away, and question the implicit nature of what I had heretofore taken for granted, I might speak of the capital S Southern, as something different from my everyday experience in the culture. When the word ‘southern’ is capitalized within a quotation, it is the author’s preference. However, the South is always the South.

my eye, she began backtracking, “Well, I guess you might be southern, but it’s a different kind of Southern,” she allowed. She granted me, in a manner I suppose she thought was generous of her, permission to keep my membership in my own culture. I do so appreciate it, even today.

An ironic rejoinder to Miss Melanie was given to me a couple of years later by a sweet Delta woman, my mother’s mother, Mrs. Campbell. We had had to take her out of the Delta a few years earlier when her health had deteriorated to where she could not take care of herself and my Aunt Sissy. I visited her one day in the nursing home near Little Rock where she and Sister were living together. She had gone blind because of her diabetes, but that day she grabbed my arm and looked right at me with her sightless hazel eyes and said she had to tell me a secret.

“This is our family’s darkest secret,” she said, “You must tell no one, ever.” Intrigued, I promised. “My grandfather,” she whispered, “was a Yankee.” “A Yankee?” I whispered back. “Yes, a Yankee,” she confirmed in a hushed tone. “Remember,” she cautioned, “No one must know.” Now, my own daddy is originally from the northeast, and once they got over the initial shock of who my mama brought home from the University of Arkansas to meet them, she and my granddaddy always loved him dearly. I guessed that the difference between my father and her granddaddy was that her grandfather was an actual Yankee, as in a “War Between the States” Yankee.

So I went home that day to my mother and said, “Mama, Grandma told me a family secret today.” “Oh she did,” Mama said, “what was that?” “She told me,” I paused for effect, “that *your* great-granddaddy was a *Yankee*.” Mama just looked at me

for a minute, shook her head, and said, “I have been telling her for over forty years,” she too paused for effect, “that being from North Carolina does not make a man a Yankee.”

Needless to say, having been raised in Arkansas, educated in South Carolina and Louisiana, and generally having applied myself to being a student of the South, I have learned that there are many Souths, each with its own particular worldview. I think every enclave of the South is special and fascinating and worthy of study. I have chosen to start with my own niche, because it is nearest my heart, it is in my blood, and I know it best. To borrow a line from southern sociologist John Shelton Reed (1985), I have been studying this particular tribe for twenty-seven years. Southern writer Carolyn Haines is from Mississippi, and uses the rural southern setting of her childhood in most of her writing. She says, “In my mind, I have to know where these characters have walked, what kinds of things grow around them, what they like and dislike about their environment” (McCord 1998:134).

Louise Chawla (1994) has stated that there is a connection forged between childhood experiences and creativity. This connection has been cited in fields such as anthropology, geography, education, as well as through poetry, supporting the idea that childhood experiences of the world can have an enduring impact on adult creativity. I draw inspiration from my childhood in the Delta. I use this inspiration as an adult to enrich my work. Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (1999) wrote an ethnography about the older white southern ladies in her Georgia hometown. It was exciting for me to find a study so akin to my own, and another researcher with the same fears of not getting it right, holding the same regard for her informants, women she had known most of her life.

St. Pierre quoted Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984) as saying that we should study our “growing up places” (269).

I assert here and truly believe that only someone in my position could do the particular research I report here. This is not to say that I am the only person who can do it, but I do think it would have to be a person with family connections in a town like this. Sweetwater is a very small town where everyone knows everyone going back many generations. If I were to just walk into another small southern town, any other southern town, and try to do this kind of research, my results would be drastically different. If one of my classmates had tried to go to Sweetwater and tried to do what I did, I doubt they would have been successful. Maria Elena Garcia (2000) conducted ethnographic research in Peru in the Andes. Her grandfather was Andean, and her informants discussed with her their concerns about how other people would understand them and their lives, which was naturally tied to how the anthropologist studying them could understand them. They felt that someone with “Andean blood” would understand them better than a stranger with no blood ties to the culture, and she met that qualification through her grandfather.

In traditional Tiwi culture, the easiest way to deal with strangers is to kill them (Beals, Spindler and Spindler 1973: 149). Now, Sweetwater folks are not so extreme in their treatment of strangers as the Tiwi, but a stranger is always a stranger, and everyone knows it. A man from the Arkansas Cultural Heritage Department came down to talk to Stoddard about his woodwork. Stoddard did talk to him. But that man was in town right before I got there, and he was not sitting at the table eating Vivian’s good cooking at supper time like I was.

My research is so precious to me, because I was welcomed into homes with entirely open arms. I was welcomed into lives and invited to share them. My belonging settles on me a huge sense of responsibility. I don't believe it ever occurred to anyone to not answer my questions. My experience has been truly blessed. Even as I visit with the living, I am surrounded by those who are gone. I can feel them, hear them around me, and sometimes even smell their scent – a hint of perfume, a man's hair tonic, tobacco. The stories of the living bring to life all the memories around me, and sometimes I learn things I did not know about my own family.

I have chosen to study the older white middle class residents of the rural southern town of Sweetwater. Studies of this cultural group are rare. Just as Arkansas and the Arkansas Delta in particular, have been for the most part neglected by historians of the South (Whayne and Gatewood 1993), the southern white middle class has been neglected or ignored outright by scholars and historians. Emily Powers Wright describes white middle class southerners as the “forgotten people” of the South (2001: 94). Wright argues that the longstanding pattern of excluding the white middle class from discourse about the South stems from the tradition of only portraying white southerners as aristocrats or poor white trash in literature and film. John Shelton Reed protests that “‘the shorthand of social types’ that so easily inscribes the highest and lowest strata of southern white society has created ‘an egregious blind-spot, a vacuum in our popular vocabulary for discussing the present-day South.’ – a vacuum inhabited by the southern white middle class” in Wright (2001: 100).

Columnist Celestine Sibley, of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, described the white middle class as the “other South, the people who did not live behind white columns

and had no slaves” (Wright 2001: 95). Margaret Jones Bolsterli (2000) said that if there were as many mansions in the South as people seem to think, they would have to be row houses. She said there was one mansion in her neighborhood in Watson, Arkansas, when she was a child, but it had no veranda, was about to fall down, and faced a levee not thirty yards from its front door (128). In Sweetwater, there once were a couple of mansions out by the Mississippi River, similarly facing the levee, but they were lost to fire when my mother was a child. There is only one house that could be described as a mansion in Sweetwater today, and it was built in the 1970’s by a prominent local family.

I have tried to confine my discussion of Delta culture to a few subjects that are particular to the South, to rural life, and to Delta life in particular. Features that the Delta shares with the South in general include a penchant for violence, the prevalence of evangelical Protestantism (Gatewood 1993), and an unparalleled level of devotion to community (Reed 1993). Rural life-style is often typified by self-sufficiency (Hofferth and Iceland 1998), and this is certainly the case in the Arkansas Delta. The aspects of Delta life that I have spent the most time observing are work, mostly women’s work, and visiting. Gatewood (1993) said that for women, life in the Delta was a life of work (7). Visiting is one of the most important social activities in the Delta, for women as well as men (Payne 1993). Topics related to women’s visiting are a “culture of caring” for the ill and the dead, as well as reciprocity (Payne 1993:141).

Chapter 2: Introducing the Participants

The women and men in my thesis have been known to me all my life. I know them so well that I undoubtedly take for granted many things about them. Because they play such a central role in my life, and in my body of research, I want to try to make them known to the reader as well as I possibly can by providing detailed descriptions of their lives.

Mrs. Campbell

Perhaps it was she who instilled most in me my love of the Delta. Mrs. Campbell is my grandmother. She loved the Delta so much that she never wanted to see the ocean, nor did she care to ever see the mountains. She loved her little white house on Cashion Street surrounded by her azaleas, mimosa trees, and mulberry trees—the kind of tree with the broad, fuzzy palmate leaves that seep a bitter white milk where they tear. She just wanted to stay in her little white house in her little Delta town until she “crossed over the river” (Byrd 1942: 64) and could be laid in the spot that she and her husband had picked in Mt. Carmel Cemetery, right across the street from their house. Her husband had been waiting there for twenty years when she joined him in November of 1991. He had wanted that spot because from there he could see his living room.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Campbell did not get to live out all of her wish. Seven summers before her death we had to take her out of the Delta. She never accepted that she was gone from her home forever. She had plans every day to go home, and although she went blind, her mind’s eye was as clear as ever, and most of what she saw was the road home to Sweetwater.

Mrs. Campbell grew up very poor. She was the youngest child of parents who were each half American Indian, with the names of Barnes and Walker. She was the only one of her siblings to graduate from high school. Her high school ring was lost somewhere around her 81st year, but until that time I would see it. I could only look at it, though, I could never wear it, not because she'd mind, but because it was so tiny, it didn't even fit my little finger. A couple of years before Mrs. Campbell's death, her daughter, Donna, asked if any of Mrs. Campbell's family attended her graduation. Mrs. Campbell replied, "Grace did." Grace was Mrs. Campbell's older sister, and in many ways she was Mrs. Campbell's staunchest supported for much of her life. Grace was married and lived in town. She let Mrs. Campbell come and live with her so that she could go to school and graduate. When Mrs. Campbell married Harl, they had very little money, and Harl was frequently out of state working on jobs. Grace had money and she also had a car. Whenever one of Mrs. Campbell's children would get sick, Grace would come and get them, take them to the doctor, and pay the medical costs.

Mrs. Campbell was a huge presence housed in a tiny package. Under five feet tall, she wore a size 5 shoe, but she seemed so much larger. She was a general, literally able to lead a battalion of men; they were armed with jackhammers and trowels, rather than guns and bombs, but lead them she did, for over thirty years. Being a general did not, however, detract from Mrs. Campbell's sweet side.

In order to fully appreciate Mrs. Campbell, you have to understand her love of "sugar." I'm not talking about the sweet white granules that you sprinkle on your cereal; I'm talking about kisses, hugs, love. I don't know that I, or any of Mrs. Campbell's children (until later, when she was angry over leaving home) or grandchildren, ever

walked by her that she didn't say, "Come here honey, and give me some sugar." "Give me some sugar" are words that I have heard countless times in my life; too much was never enough sugar for Mrs. Campbell. She would pass this trait on to her children. Her eldest son, Charles, has been known to refuse to start the car and move from his driveway until he gets some sugar from his children or grandchildren. "Dad," my cousin Charlie would complain from the back seat, "I'm forty years old, I'm getting a little old for sugar." It is my mama's opinion that one is never too old for sugar.

Mrs. Campbell was a general, and she was a teacher. She taught her children and her grandchildren to drive and to cook. Out on the sometimes straight sometimes curvy lake road surrounding Sweetwater's Grand Lake, just at twilight when the cicadas began to sing, she taught me to slow down when entering a curve, and began to accelerate only when halfway through, when I could see the other side. I continue to follow this advice. I, as she did, like to know what is waiting around the bend before I rush headlong into it.

Mrs. Campbell also taught me to cook. She taught me to make cobbler, to fry catfish, and that cornbread dressing is only good if you get your hands into it. She also taught me the secret to making the best fried okra ever, and I do not choose to divulge my secrets. Even when she began to go blind she would still cook. When we would drive down into the Delta my appetite would kick in because I knew when we arrived there would be a pineapple glazed ham, a lemon icebox pie for my mama, and a chocolate meringue pie for me. At the end she cooked by feel and instinct and it was good as ever.

After dinner (which is the noon meal, supper being the evening meal) every day, Mrs. Campbell would burn the trash in a metal drum out in the yard. It smelled good: burning paper and chicken bones. The aluminum cans would darken and curl, but not

burn. There would be a layer of them at the bottom of the drum when everything else had burned. The fire might take hours to burn down, because it was great fun for my older brother and me to keep it stoked with sticks and leaves and whatever else we might find in the yard that could be flammable. Little flakes of charred black paper would float into the sky with the breeze, and my brother's smiling image over the top of the drum would be made distorted and wavery by the heat of the fire.

Mrs. Campbell married a man named Horal, called Harl by all who knew him. He had eleven brothers and sisters. His was a happy family, full of handsome men and striking women. Harl was terribly handsome, with strong arms, slightly bowed legs, and the whitest teeth. He brought joy to all who knew him. He belonged to that particular breed of man who could ride a horse, drive a tractor, a backhoe, a front-end loader, a cement mixer, and any truck made, as well as repair them. He could lay the cement foundation of a house, build it, run its plumbing and electrical systems, and then do the exterior mason work. He could also hunt, catch, and dress any game animal and bring it home for Mrs. Campbell to cook. Early in their married lives they didn't have much, but with a man like that you didn't need much else.

Mrs. Campbell began each day before the sun rose. When Harl was still alive she would make his breakfast. You would smell the coffee first, and then the sausage. She never ate a large breakfast, usually just a piece of dry toast and a cup of coffee. But she would cook a big breakfast for whoever was visiting, and for her husband. Many years later after Harl's death she would still wake before dawn and she would sit in her green chair in the living room, the center of the seat curved from years of use. She would curl her left leg up under her right and lean on the left armrest, where she would idly stir a cup

of coffee and sip it until the sun rose. When I would visit sometimes I would sleep in the living room, and I would be woken up by tiny little “clink...clink” sounds and wake up to see my grandmother sitting in her chair with her coffee.

Mrs. Campbell had four children. The first child was stillborn. The second child was a son, named Charles. The third child was a daughter who was born dead, but after resuscitation lived, handicapped. Her name was Martha, but she was called Sissy. The fourth child was a daughter, Donna.

Mrs. Campbell’s babies were all very large. She was a gestational diabetic, although she was not diagnosed until much later. Both Charles and Donna weighed over nine pounds when they were born. The third child, Sissy, weighed over thirteen pounds. Mrs. Campbell gave birth to these massive babies at home when she herself weighed less than 100 pounds. Sissy was a blue baby. The doctor said that if she lived to see her 18th birthday it would be a miracle. Sissy turned sixty-two this year, and has lived her life with the sweet, happy mentality of a very young child. Sissy’s birth so traumatized Mrs. Campbell’s doctor that he never again delivered any baby at home, instead performing only hospital deliveries from that time on. Donna was born in a hospital at Dermott, Arkansas, in 1946.

Mrs. Campbell and Harl were very poor when the children were born. Harl worked for years at a lumber company in town owned by a man named Barrett. Early on Harl worked as a clerk, and later he worked as a contractor, building houses for the company. He would lose a finger to the company: Lil, who is another of my participants, tells that story.

In 1958, Mrs. Campbell encouraged Harl to secure a loan from a wealthy man in town to buy into a concrete business. Eventually they came to own the company and business flourished. The company was called Mobile Concrete. In the 1960's and 70's business was booming. The company laid foundations for houses and businesses, as well as taking on highway contracts to work on city streets and sidewalks. Even in the 1980's there was good business. Harl died in 1982, and Mrs. Campbell ran the business for almost another decade before selling it to a man from Lake Village, Arkansas. Today the business sits deserted and overgrown.

Mrs. Campbell and Harl worked very hard, and she enjoyed the position that work earned for her in Sweetwater. I refer to her here as Mrs. Campbell because that is how she referred to herself. She was very proud to be Mrs. Campbell, and even her close friends addressed her as such. According to a theory put forth by Elizabeth Gordon (1997), Mrs. Campbell may have used a more prestigious type of speech pattern when referring to herself and to other women in order to avoid appearing lower-class. Gordon suggests that middle-class women in particular will display linguistic behavior that is not so much a type of self-promotion, but rather a mechanism to avoid appearing low-class. For middle-class women, there is a high cost in the avoidance of appearing lower-class, with negative stereotypes and moral judgments made in part on the basis of speech patterns.

The pattern of referring to oneself and others in a manner exemplifying respect and dignity is not unique to Mrs. Campbell. Most of the southern women of her generation with whom I am acquainted will refer to each other by their full married names, even in casual conversation. Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. Helen Rutledge were

neighbors and dear friends for years, and yet they always addressed each other as Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. Rutledge. When I was going to arrive in town while Vivian was tied up in a church meeting, she suggested that I could stop by and visit with “Mrs. Sarah Macy or Mrs. Helen Rutledge” until she finished her church business. Whenever I am introduced to anyone in town I am referred to as Mrs. Campbell’s grandbaby. The women of my mother’s generation are referred to by their given names; it is only the older generation that displays this level of speech elevation. Margaret Jones Bolsterli describes the same situation, in which her mother and their neighbor refer to each other by their married names: “Mrs. Irby was probably the closest friend my mother had; she was certainly the only one whom Mother visited in the way housewives do. They would take the children and spend the day with each other sewing, canning, or just chatting. My mother was terribly fond of her, yet they too addressed each other as ‘Mrs. Irby’ and ‘Mrs. Jones’” (79). I assume that in my grandmother’s case the respect was an important factor because while her family had been poor, and she and Harl were able to build a good life for themselves and their children.

Also important to Mrs. Campbell was her personal appearance. As a young girl she had trained to be a hairdresser. Her hair and make-up always looked very nice, and she made sure Sissy’s did as well. In pictures of Mrs. Campbell you will see that she rarely showed her teeth when she smiled because she has a slightly crooked front tooth that made her self conscious. Mrs. Campbell had a standing appointment on Friday afternoons at the Beauty Shop in town for over forty years. She kept that appointment until her children had to take her out of the Delta.

Mrs. Campbell bought all of her clothes in a near-by town. There was a store named Manseurs, and they dressed her. When they would receive clothes that they thought she would like they'd call her, and she would go and buy them. This must have been a tremendous luxury for a woman who had sewn her own clothes and the clothes of her children for most of her life. They built a lovely wardrobe for her, and she didn't have to worry too much about it. Donna still has closets full of Mrs. Campbell's pretty little outfits, and boxes and boxes of tiny shoes. We buried her in her favorite dress, a mauve watered silk that she looked so pretty in.

Mrs. Campbell became a full-blown diabetic in her fifties as a consequence of her gestational diabetes. For many years, she was able to control her insulin levels with pills. She was very responsible with her disease. I never saw her get sick. She made sure she always had candy in her purse, and a dish of candy bars in the living room. She preferred Mounds and Almond joy. If she began to feel weak, she would ask me, or whoever was around to get her a piece of candy.

In her late seventies, the pills were no longer effective, and Mrs. Campbell had to start giving herself injections of insulin several times a day. She took this very much in stride. She would put the shots in her legs. She had short, thin legs, and I remember how awful the bruises looked to me, everywhere she would take a shot. She said that they didn't hurt any more than a mosquito, that she just bruised easily now.

About the same time that she began to take the injections, her eyes began to suffer. Every night she would lie in bed and put in her eye drops. And if she seemed to feel her way through the house, I just attributed it to her feeling a bit unsteady on her feet. She would lightly skim her hands over the wall or her furniture, kind of petting it. She

loved her house. Since she knew her house, she didn't run into things. She also knew Sweetwater. She drove to the grocery store, the post office, and the Beauty shop. Sweetwater is laid out on a perfect grid; she knew it like the back of her hand. She also had to pull her car into a carport with a pole dividing the two sides. It made me nervous to pull into and out of it, but she did so with no problem.

When Mrs. Campbell finally sold the business, she gave all of her grandchildren gifts of money. She bought herself a new washer and dryer. She gave her children money, and bought mink coats for herself and Donna: silver for Mrs. Campbell and sable brown for Donna, to match their hair. She also bought an ice blue 1987 Oldsmobile 98, which she paid for in cash. Whatever was left she put in the bank.

Over time, little dents and dings began to appear on the Oldsmobile. Every time we went down to the Delta there would be another scratch, another mark. Mrs. Campbell still got around fine, and cooked like a dream. Her clothes matched, her makeup looked good. We had no idea she was nearly blind. It wasn't until much later that we realized that she and Sissy had worked out a system for driving. Mrs. Campbell would drive at a moderate speed, and if Sissy saw anything coming she would yell "Mama!" at which point Mrs. Campbell would hit the breaks. This worked fine if what Sissy saw was a stop sign, but not so well if what Sissy saw was a car coming from the opposite direction on the highway. That maneuver almost caused a horrible wreck for the car unlucky enough to be behind Mrs. Campbell on the highway one afternoon, and Donna soon heard about it in Little Rock, but not from Mrs. Campbell.

Once they learned how bad Mrs. Campbell's eyesight had become, Donna and Charles were in a really bad position. Mrs. Campbell was very much in control of her

life, and she would never willingly surrender that control. She had a mortal fear of nursing homes, and she had trained Sissy to scream and throw horrible tantrums if the words “nursing home” were ever mentioned. They wanted her to be able to stay in her home. She already had help that came in several times a week to help with cleaning. They hoped that they could find someone who could come more often, to do the shopping and drive Mrs. Campbell and Sissy around. It became obvious that this would never work when Mrs. Campbell failed her vision test when trying to renew her driver’s license. She told Donna that she knew of a doctor in Greenville, Mississippi, who would provide a waiver for the vision portion of the driving test for the right amount of money. She wanted Donna to take her there. Donna refused.

For several years prior to this Mrs. Campbell had been taking little falls. She would get dizzy and take a tumble. She hadn’t hurt herself badly. Once she cracked a couple of ribs leaning down into the deep freeze, but she hadn’t broken a leg or a hip or an arm. About the same time she failed her vision test, she stopped getting up; instead she would stay in bed, and not eat. If she wasn’t eating, then Sissy wasn’t eating, because Sissy couldn’t cook. Donna’s cousins, Stoddard and Vivian saw what was happening and called Donna. They all agreed that something had to be done. By the time Donna came down, Mrs. Campbell had to be hospitalized for several weeks. Donna stayed in the Delta that whole summer, with Mrs. Campbell in and out of the hospital. By the end of the summer Mrs. Campbell had to be moved to a hospital in Little Rock. Donna packed up her mother’s and sister’s things and took Sissy to her home in Little Rock. Neither Mrs. Campbell nor Sissy would go to the Delta again, until seven years later when Mrs. Campbell died.

Donna

Donna is my mother, the youngest child of Mrs. Campbell and Harl. A beautiful woman with brunette hair and bright blue eyes, she is as smart as she is lovely. She has always seemed to me to blend a stunning mix of femininity and power. As a member of the baby-boomer generation, she was raised thinking she could succeed at anything she wanted to do. In her high school year book the quote next to her senior picture is “anything worth doing is worth doing well.” There have been times in her life when Donna has excelled at things that most would consider activities reserved for men. Never one to be daunted, Donna always has met any challenge with a devil-may-care attitude and usually there is a smile of triumph after the fact.

Donna can fly. The summer after her freshman year of college, a man was going to teach her older brother Charles to fly. Donna thought she should learn as well. Convincing her daddy was only slightly difficult. This was the man, who, after being questioned by his hunting buddies as to why he was bringing along his little *girl* to deer camp, simply had the driver stop the truck, gave Donna his gun where she was sitting with the other men’s sons in the back of the truck, and told her to shoot an armadillo that was rooting on the edge of the woods. Donna raised the rifle, took aim, and shot the armadillo clean through. As the armadillo was lifted into the air and flipped by the force of Donna’s bullet, the men in the cab of the truck quit talking, and said nothing more.

The fact that Harl would let Donna learn to fly probably didn’t surprise many people. He’d been letting her drive around town since she was eleven. But Donna didn’t just want to fly. She wanted to fly alone. The fact that Donna would be the first woman to fly a solo flight in Chicot County history did surprise some people. Maybe Harl was

finally shaken by something Donna intended to do, for he would not go to the air strip to watch her landing. Instead he had his men at the concrete plant lift him up high above the trees in the bucket of a front-end loader so that he could watch from the sky about a quarter mile away from the air strip.

A crowd of men had gathered at the air strip to watch Donna solo that day. Her older brother Charles and their flight instructor Billy actually stood out in the middle of the runway. Donna said, “I don’t know what they thought they were going to do there.” Typically a flight student will land and take off three times in order to pass the solo test. Rather than stop each time, Donna did two touch-and-goes before landing after her third round. This level of skill greatly impressed Billy, and he’ll still tell you that Donna was the only student he ever had that would wave at him from the plane as she was making her passes.

Donna so loved flying that her father and another man went in together and bought a plane of their own, a piper cub J-3. The Piper Cub J-3 is one of the most elemental flying machines, with an extra long wingspan that allows it to act more like a glider than most planes. The steering mechanism is a stick that comes up from the floor with separate foot pedals for rudders. Most personal aircraft have a steering wheel to which the rudder is attached. Donna and Billy had a good time in that plane, landing in unusual places such as the levee or on a sandbar in the Mississippi River. They practiced stalls, and tried to dip the wings into the Grand Lake. Had Harl known any of this he would have lived in the bucket of the front-end loader.

Donna currently is the Gifted and Talented Administrator in one of the finest school districts in Arkansas, just outside of Little Rock. A few years ago, several of the

men she works with, including her superintendent, became interested in flying. Flying became the general topic of conversation, and the fact that Donna could fly was met with some disbelief and mild patronization. The men all wanted to know what she had flown. The fact that she had owned and flown a J-3 impressed them all. J-3's are still around, although they are now very expensive. One of the men actually went out and bought a J-3 but as of yet he still has not learned to fly it. It was only a matter of time until she would have to prove herself; the men were after her all the time to go in the air with them. The day she did go up, they were flying along, having a nice time out over the Grand Prairie region of the Delta, when her superintendent took his hands off of the controls and said "Fly, Donna." And so she did, it wasn't difficult; this plane had a steering wheel. Smart and beautiful, beautiful and smart, constantly underestimated, constantly surpassing expectations.

In high school, Donna was a majorette. She was the drum major, which means she was the one in the front, in the middle, leading all the other majorettes, as well as the band, in marching activities. It has always been important to Donna to strive for perfection. She would practice for hours and hours, never stopping twirling, never dropping. She would go out to the side of the house in the late afternoon, when the sun would cast a long strong shadow. She would stand so that the sun would cast her twirling image on the side of the house, and perfect her twirling by practicing against her own shadow, watching for flaws in technique.

The last time we were in Mrs. Campbell's house, we cleaned out the attic. I found my mother's flaming batons, which still had burn marks and bits of scorched cloth at the ends. I asked her if she really twirled with those things, on fire, and she just smiled

at me. My mother can fly, and twirl flame; sometimes I just sit and say this to myself, like a mantra. She can fly, and throw flame into the air and catch and twirl it. I have never seen her equal.

Stoddard and Vivian

I have known Vivian and her husband Stoddard all of my life. However, it is only in the last five years that I have had the opportunity to become very close to them. Prior to starting work on my thesis, I had always stayed with Mrs. Campbell when I went down to the Delta. It was not until Mrs. Campbell had to leave the Delta and I decided to write my thesis about the region that I was able to spend lots of time with Stoddard and Vivian.

The first time I called them from Baton Rouge I told them I was doing research about the Delta and that I'd like to drive up and spend the weekend with them and visit with them, if that would be all right. They said "sure, sounds fine, come on up." Vivian later told me that after we got off the phone she sat there and wondered "what are we going to do with a 23 year old girl for two days? How will we entertain her?" As it turns out, entertaining me was not a problem. We had a wonderful time. We talked non-stop. And we have had a wonderful time every time I have visited them over the last four years, except when I was there for the funerals of Mrs. Campbell, and then of Vivian's mother, Grace.

Since my first night at Stoddard and Vivian's house, we have been talking, and we have not stopped. On my last visit to the Delta, they told me that I now know things about their lives that their own sons don't know, because they never talked with them about the old stories and topics I ask about. Vivian said that there are so many things that she doesn't remember until we start talking about them, and then it all comes back. Their

home has become my haven. We go visiting, they feed me incredibly well, I watch Stoddard do his woodwork and follow Vivian as she does her daily work, and once we went fishing. Stoddard likes to go early; my grandparents were more of the fish in the middle of the day kind of people. I thought that I would fish more with Stoddard, but there never seems to be enough time for all the things I want to do, and all the people I want to talk to. Our one trip was memorable, though.

It was cold and we started before dawn. I wore a shirt, a sweater, and a jacket, but it was not nearly enough to keep away the cold. We were out on the levee when the first color began to spread across the sky. The water on the river was very rough that day; it was windy, and there were quite a few logs and things that Stoddard had to dodge in the current in the pre-dawn light. Stoddard did not tell me until later the kind of damage a log headed downriver could do to a fishing boat headed upriver. Had I known I would have been scared as well as cold. It was not full light until we had been on the water for over half an hour. Vivian was bundled up like a little orange snowman in a pair of her father's old hunting coveralls. I was shaking and praying for the sun, and a cove where we could stop to fish, and get out of the wind.

As I child I had been fishing countless times on the Mississippi River, but usually in the summer. This was October, and the mornings were chilly on the water. But we didn't even have to stay long; the fish began to jump into our boat. In just over an hour we (Stoddard had three poles going) caught three white catfish and two yellow ones, all near or over twenty pounds. This is not unusual. Many feel that the best fishing in the world is in the Delta. Miss Sherri, one of my most-loved participants, says her husband

thinks that “you’re gonna start at Grand Lake (which is the oxbow lake in Sweetwater), move up to Lake Chicot, and then move up straight to heaven.”

During my first year of research Stoddard caught a sixty-nine pound catfish. It was horribly huge and ugly. Its whiskers looked like the wingspan of an eagle. The record catfish for the region weighed seventy-one pounds. Not surprisingly, Stoddard and Vivian’s deep freeze is well stocked with catfish. When she was still at home, Stoddard made sure Mrs. Campbell’s freezer was also stocked with catfish. It was frozen in paper milk cartons.

Vivian is Mrs. Campbell’s niece, the only child of Mrs. Campbell’s older sister. Mrs. Campbell was only fourteen when Vivian was born, so they have always been close. Vivian wrote to me last year that she still misses Boonie (Mrs. Campbell) because she visited her nearly every day. Vivian and her husband Stoddard live about a quarter of a mile from Mrs. Campbell’s house. They have lived in that house since long before I was born. Stoddard and Harl built that house together.

Mrs. Campbell was fourteen years older than Vivian and Vivian is eighteen years older than Donna, who is her first cousin. Vivian was only ten years older than Donna’s older brother, Charles, and he has told me many times that Vivian was one of the prettiest women he had ever seen, stunning, as was her mother, Grace. Vivian and her mother both also bore the family trademark of tiny feet. Stoddard informed me once that my size six and a half feet made me something of an Amazon. Being 5’2” tall, this was the first time anyone had ever suggested such a thing to me. What made it even funnier is the fact that Stoddard is an extremely tall man; at least six feet four inches in height, he towers over me, and never mind that I can fit both of my feet into one of his tennis shoes.

Stoddard is an exceedingly handsome man and he is a very courtly southern gentleman. Every morning at about 4:30 he walks the streets of Sweetwater for exercise. Accompanying him on his walks are two widowed ladies. On his feet are state of the art running shoes sent to him every few months by his son Jay, who is a gifted tri-athlete. In his pocket on these walks is his pistol. No danger will befall the ladies while they are with Stoddard. A lean, tall, handsome older gentleman with bright blue eyes, very tanned skin, and pure white hair flowing back from a high forehead, wearing khaki pants, fabulous New Balance running shoes, and packing a semi-automatic pistol squires the widow ladies around the still dark pre-dawn streets of Sweetwater. There had been some muggings in town. Stoddard is not taking any chances, nor is he giving up his morning walk. He originally armed himself with an antique revolver, which may or may not have worked, but his sons got him a new pistol for Christmas that year.

Stoddard is from Forrest, Mississippi. In the late 1930's he had recently gotten out of the Navy, and he went to Jackson, Mississippi, to attend business school. After business school, he got a job as a clerk on a barge in the Mississippi River. The society on the barge was much like the society in the military. There was a captain, and other officers. Stoddard sat at the Captain's table and dined with the other officers. Stoddard says he thought he was something.

Stoddard was eventually allotted a fine private cabin with his own shower. When he first came onto the barge, Stoddard had to share a cabin equipped with bunk beds with two other men, "and old men at that," he said. One of his roommates drank whiskey and prune juice, and, Stoddard confided in a wry tone, wore silk underwear. After he told me that he just looked at me, seemingly still perplexed after all these years, and let me absorb

the image of a grizzled old riverman swilling whiskey and prune juice, lounging on his bunk in silk underwear. Vivian broke the silence by commenting, "How about that!"

One night one of Stoddard's fellow workers asked him if he wanted to go to shore to Sweetwater. Stoddard said, "Sweetwater what?" "Sweetwater, Arkansas," his friend answered; he had a girlfriend there in town. They rode on a tug boat from the barge to a landing on the Arkansas side of the river, and they called a cab to come out to the landing and take them into town. This picture of Sweetwater fascinated me: there have been no taxi cabs there in my lifetime, and the little store at the landing has been falling down since I was a child.

When Stoddard and his friend got into town, things were bustling. His friend was to meet his girl at a popular restaurant located next to the train depot. It was open twenty-four hours a day, and always busy because of the train traffic. Stoddard remembered, "We walked into the Crystal Grill and Café...." "The Crystal Grill and Café," echoed Vivian, with a smile. Stoddard said simply, "And there was Vivian."

Stoddard was to stay in Sweetwater. Vivian's family was from Sweetwater; in fact, her father owned the Crystal Grill and Café where they met. A friend invited Stoddard to ride along and help him out with a job he was doing for Texas Gas. Stoddard did, and he said that he saw that this work was something he could make a career out of.

Stoddard was to work for Texas Gas for thirty-five years until his retirement. Texas Gas provided for a very comfortable life for Stoddard and Vivian. They raised and educated three very successful sons, and their life is exactly as they wish for it to be. They have the means to live as they want. One day I walked into the kitchen to see Stoddard communicating his extreme frustration with a credit card company. Neither

Stoddard nor Vivian had any credit cards; they have always paid up front for everything. They have no debt. However, Stoddard was going to apply for this card, because it was offered through Farm Bureau, the company his eldest son worked for, and there was some benefit to it. However, Stoddard was having trouble getting approved for a card because he had no credit history, since neither he nor Vivian had ever bought anything on credit. He bellowed at the unfortunate worker on the other end of the phone, “Don’t you realize I could *buy* you and your company too?” I believe the credit card idea was abandoned, but I can’t be sure.

Stoddard and Vivian have been married for well over fifty years now. They are a devoted couple, they enjoy each other’s company, and they exhibit a well-practiced sense of humor between them. Stoddard is gruff, but tender in many ways. In their backyard there is a free-standing gate latched to a gate post. You can open the gate and swing it back and forth, and latch it again. The gate is weathered white wood, and obviously aged. The gate stands alone in the middle of their backyard because it is the gate from Vivian’s parents’ house that she used to swing on as a little girl. Stoddard went and got it and set it up in their yard for Vivian’s enjoyment. When he sunk the postholes he made sure it was level, so that it would still swing.

When my mother read the part of my story about the gate, she said, “Oh, that must be the gate that Daddy used to tell me about.” Harl had told my mother that when Vivian was a little girl, she would wait by that gate in the evenings, because Harl would walk by their house on his way home from work. Vivian would always be there, and Harl would always stop to play, no matter how tired he was.

In the last couple of years Vivian has had a horrible time with her knees. She has had six surgeries, and is scheduled for more. She is in constant pain, and not getting around as well as she did before. Mrs. Sarah Macy told me that she recently saw Stoddard and Vivian at the Wal-Mart in Greenville, Mississippi, but she did not stop them because “Vivian was getting along at a pretty good clip,” and she didn’t want to slow her down.

Stoddard and Vivian’s yard has always been full of bird houses and wind chimes. Since Vivian’s knees have gotten bad, Stoddard has built a structure that they call the “Bird Sanctuary” right outside of the kitchen window. It is like a fence row, about five feet long, with two tall posts at either end. Stoddard collected all of the birdhouses from all over the yard and brought them together on this one structure. There are birdhouses all over it, up high and down low. When I was last there spring was coming, and the cardinals were out. The sanctuary was covered with cardinals and little goldfinches. There were these fat brown birds all over the place with bright orange beaks. I asked what they were and Stoddard and Vivian said they were female cardinals. I commented that the male cardinals were much prettier than the females, and Stoddard said, “That’s the way it is in nature.” Vivian can see the birds now from the kitchen and dining room windows without having to go outside. It is obvious that the birds give her much pleasure, except for the greedy grackles.

Lil

Lil came to Sweetwater in the summer of 1942. She was from the nearby town of Crossett. She had been working at a ten cent store, walking two miles to work every day. She wanted to save up enough money to go to Little Rock and take a nursing course. She

had always wanted to be a nurse. Lil's sister was living in Sweetwater in a boarding house for young women just a couple of blocks from downtown. She invited Lil to come live with her and work in Sweetwater. There was a cotton buyer who needed someone to write checks for him. Lil came, and she stayed. She married a handsome farmer and had three children, two sons and a daughter. Lil was always a working woman. She ended up working as a bookkeeper for a lumber company until her brother-in-law, who was a pharmacist, staked her in a business of her own. She opened a women's clothing store, called Lil's, in 1956.

Lil worked at the Sweetwater Lumber company for fourteen years. Harl also worked at the lumber company for most of those years. The last few years before he bought into Mobile Concrete, he was building houses, but he was doing so as a general contractor employed by the owner of the lumber company. Lil and Harl were great friends. My granddaddy was missing the pinky finger on his right hand. I knew he had sawed it off, but I never knew the details until Lil and I started visiting. She told me that she was sitting in the office at the lumber company one day when one of the men ran in from the shop and yelled, "Come quick, Mr. Campbell's cut off his hand!" She ran out into the shop and there was my granddaddy with blood pouring off of his hand, looking at his finger which was still lying on the table. He said, "Now Lil, I'm just going to pick that up and stick it right back on," and he pretended to do so. Of course he couldn't save the finger, and thus he came to have the distinctive hands I always associated with him. I would know my granddaddy's hands anywhere. When I was a little girl and we would go down to Sweetwater for a family visit sometimes a bunch of my granddaddy's brothers would be there. I was the youngest of all of the grandchildren, and they would want to

pick me up and swing me around—my Uncle Jack would do this well into my teenage years, as well as stealing my nose. I would see all of these hands offering to pick me up, and I would always run to the ones I recognized with the smooth smooth skin where his finger used to be.

I have always known Lil as “Aunt Lil.” I think that most people in town call her Aunt Lil. Her store has been open for over forty-five years now, far longer than any other business. She knows everyone in town, as well as everything that is going on. From her spot in the middle of Main Street, just up from City Hall, she can see everything. There is not as much to see now as there once was, but she keeps up just the same. My mother spent a lot of time at Lil’s when she was growing up. Lil’s has always been a gathering place, a social place, and that has certainly not changed over time. I may see any one of a dozen women I know there any time I drop by, just sitting on the stools at the back of the store, visiting. Lil used to sit on the counter at the front of the store. There is a spot where the paint is worn away, and the wood is grooved in the shape of a woman’s body. The counter tells how she sat in that spot for decades, watching the comings and goings of the town. Several years ago Lil had to have both knees replaced, and she can no longer jump up on the counter. If she is standing next to it, though, her hand will rub back and forth over the spot where the wood is worn so soft, and remember.

I went to see Lil a few weeks ago. I parked across the street from Lil’s store. She was sitting at the front of the store and she saw me before I crossed the street. She said, “Come on in Shug, where you been, watcha doin’, where you goin’?” I told her I was coming right there to see her, and she told me to sit with her behind the counter. We

visited for about an hour. In that hour a couple of black ladies came in and bought some undergarments, and a couple of white ladies came in and browsed around for a few minutes before leaving empty handed. As the ladies left Lil called, “Y’all have a good day and come back,” and in the same breath she said, “They can’t be from here, I’ve never seen them in my life.”

In addition to running her store, Lil oversees the Mt. Carmel cemetery fund, into which the families of the departed pay for the upkeep of the graves. The caretaker for the cemetery came in to talk to her about some business. They were locating and discussing the graves of the lady and man who had died that week. Not only does Lil know everyone who lives in the town, but if they’re buried in Mt. Carmel, she also knows where they lay. The caretaker knew my family and he told me I come from good people. Lil told him a couple of the stories about how she had worked with my granddaddy at the lumber company, including the story about him cutting off his finger.

Lil decided to close an hour early so that she and I could go for a ride around town. I had about an hour until I needed to be back at Stoddard and Vivian’s for supper. When Mrs. Campbell still lived in town Lil used to pick her and Sissy up at Christmastime and take them for rides to see all of the Christmas lights on the houses around the lake.

Lil and I rode up and down all of the streets of town. She keeps track of the living as well as the dead. She told me where everyone lived and where they used to live, and if there was an empty lot she told me whose house used to be there. We drove by Mrs. Campbell’s house and both agreed that it didn’t look too bad. It did though, and it broke my heart to see it so forlorn and empty. As we drove back downtown Lil said,

“Town’s dying, Sugar, I’m going to have to close the shop soon. I can’t afford to stay open much longer.” I reminded her that she had said those same words to me almost five years earlier, and she laughed. After our ride Lil dropped me off in town to get my car and I got back to Stoddard and Vivian’s house at five o’clock on the dot.

Lil is seventy-nine years old now, as she says, “it’s obvious to any one who looks that I’m no spring chicken.” She has kept her store because she loves it. Although it is no longer the money-maker it once was, the store still serves an important function downtown: it is the anchor. Lil’s has always been a gathering place, centrally located in town as it is, but at this point in the life of the town I think it is more important that the ladies have somewhere to get together, in addition to somewhere to buy dresses. Once Lil’s closes, I don’t know what will happen; she and her store are the lifeblood, a symbol of continuity and endurance for the town.

Mrs. Helen Rutledge

I have known Miss Helen all of my life, but as time goes on I begin to see more and more the number of roles she has played in my family. When I was a little girl I knew how much my mama loved Miss Helen, because we would frequently visit her on our trips to the Delta. I have learned that although Miss Helen was quite a bit younger, she was a dear friend to my grandmother, and that through all the years that they were neighbors the twice daily visits that they shared were a precious time in the lives of two busy mothers.

I have learned of the important role that Miss Helen played in the life of my own mother. Miss Helen had two sons, and my mother was born between her sons, so she was of an age to be mothered by Miss Helen as well. Mama has sweet memories of times

spent with Miss Helen through her childhood years. Raising an exceptional child like my mother's sister, Sissy, takes a lot of the parent's time and attention. It took a lot of Mrs. Campbell's time, and ladies like Miss Helen, and another neighbor, Miss Sally, were good and loving in terms of the time and attention they bestowed on my mother. Mama remembers that Miss Helen always made sure that she had a dress whenever a school dance was coming up.

I don't know that I ever realized the amount of influence that Miss Helen had on my mother's life until the last few years. And as I have spent more time with Miss Helen, I have seen many aspects of her that I see in my mother. The night of my grandmother's visitation, the room at the funeral home was full of friends of my family's from Sweetwater. There were many people I didn't recognize, but of course Mama knew them all. Miss Helen came in with Lil in a flurry of hugs and smiles, and as my mama and Miss Helen were embracing, I realized how similar they were to each other. Mama and Miss Helen were both dressed beautifully, in tasteful tailored clothes, and Miss Helen was even wearing a rectangular diamond pavé pendant on an omega necklace that was almost identical to my mother's own necklace. It was one of those times when the pieces fall into place. It was at that moment that I realized that many of the aspects of womanhood displayed by my mother had probably been learned from Miss Helen.

A better role-model than Miss Helen would be difficult to find. She is lovely, not only in looks, but also in attitude and spirit. She is a beautiful woman who loves her family, enjoys her life, and has been generously willing to share her life and her memories of my family with me.

Mrs. Sarah Macy

Mrs. Sarah Macy is from Alabama. She is straight and tall and has not changed in the time that I have known her. She is still as pretty as she was as a young wife. She grew up a city girl in Birmingham and fell in love with a football player from Arkansas at the University of Alabama. When I asked her how they had met, Miss Sarah told me that she had actually picked her husband out before she even started college. Her father had been a booster for Alabama, and Miss Sarah saw a picture of Buddy Macy in a football program. She was taken with him before she ever met him, and circumstances conspired with her when she did arrive at the University where Buddy had already been going to school and playing football for a couple of years. They met and fell in love. They wed and moved to Detroit where he played professional football for the Detroit Lions. When his football career was ended by an injury, they moved to Sweetwater. His family had owned and farmed land there for four generations. Buddy Macy farmed and Sarah Macy taught school. They raised three children in Sweetwater. Buddy died two years ago and Sarah still lives in Sweetwater. Their children live in Texas, North Carolina, and North Arkansas.

I asked Miss Sarah if she planned to stay in Sweetwater, and she said no, not too much longer. She said, "Susan, I love my kitchen, I waited a long time for this kitchen, and I'd like to enjoy it a little bit longer." She and Mr. Buddy had remodeled the kitchen a few years ago. Because she was not a native to Sweetwater, I asked how she felt about the town, how she had felt about moving there with her husband. She told me she could not have picked a better place to raise her children. She said that her children had the kind of childhood that most of their friends from college could only imagine. The

Sweetwater of thirty years ago was the ideal place to live and raise a young family.

Regarding the Sweetwater of today, Miss Sarah echoed Lil's words, that the "town's dying."

I always enjoy my visits with Miss Sarah. She is intelligent, astute, and remarkably well informed on world events. Every time I see her, she has something to send home with me to read. Added to this, she loves my parents. She and my mother taught school together, and they are fast friends.

Because Miss Sarah was raised in a large city, and in another state, she can talk with me about the ways that life in the Delta is different from her life in Alabama. Most of the differences she had to learn very quickly as a young wife.

The first thing Miss Sarah learned upon arriving in the Delta was that entertainment was going to be extremely different than what she was used to. She had loved the Starlite Opera at Birmingham Southern University. There was no opera in the Delta, not in Sweetwater. The main entertainment was that everyone, black and white families alike, would get cleaned up on Saturday nights and go downtown. All of the stores would stay open until nine o'clock. Families would get downtown early to get a good parking space, and stay all evening to watch people and visit. My mama has told me these stories about Sweetwater Saturday nights many times.

Another type of entertainment that Miss Sarah would learn about very quickly was fun for her husband, but not so much for her. Buddy Macy loved to hunt. Almost immediately after they moved home to Sweetwater, Buddy started going hunting with his friends. He would be gone for hours, sometimes even days at a time. Miss Sarah said she stayed mad three-fourths of the time. Men in Sweetwater love to hunt, but it was a

shock to her; it was not what she was accustomed to in Birmingham. My granddaddy also hunted—everything--from deer and turkey to ducks. However, my grandmother was raised in the Delta, and she was used to the men hunting. She just assumed that much of Harl's free time would be spent in the deer woods or a duck blind.

Miss Sarah soon adapted, and when Buddy would go off to deer camp for a week at a time, she would have her mother come stay with her for a week. Her mama told her that “a man is gonna do what a man wants to do, and he's gonna buy what he wants to buy, so if you ever see anything you want, you buy it!” Miss Sarah said that Delta women see that hunting is a part of their men's lives, that it's a good clean sport (clean, except for cleaning the animals), and that it's a far better pastime than gambling, drinking, or chasing women.

Miss Sarah also had to learn that in the Delta you freeze your food. She had to learn to make pickles and kraut. “If you live in this country, you can stuff.” Family gardens produce a surplus of foods that can last all year if it is put up properly. If you didn't want to buy a freezer, you could rent an ice box at the icehouse.

The last thing Miss Sarah learned when she arrived in Sweetwater in 1953 was that there was no public library. A local teacher named Margaret Tiebel worked hard to start the public library that is there today. “Let me tell you,” Miss Sarah said, “she started with a *brick*.”

Miss Sherri and Miss Ibbey

I had the good grace to meet Miss Sherri and Miss Ibbey eight years ago. They were both teachers at the Lutheran School in Little Rock where my husband had gone to school, and where both of his parents taught. In fact, Miss Sherri taught Robert English,

and Miss Ibby taught him science. I met them because I, too, had come to work at the school, in the summer camp program.

I took to them immediately, and luckily they took to me. Miss Sherri had been teaching at the school for seven years when Miss Ibby started. They were drawn to each other instantly for many reasons. They have similarly outgoing personalities, they both have fabulously low alto voices, and they are both southern, from the Delta even. Miss Sherri is from Hamburg, Arkansas, about twenty miles east of Sweetwater, and Miss Ibby's family is from Mississippi—Greenville, Jackson, and Cleveland.

You have to understand that there are not a whole lot of southerners in the Lutheran System. The hotbed of Lutheran activity is the Midwest, and Lutherans move around a lot. They receive calls to move here and there and teach, and they follow the calls. Most of the staff at the Lutheran School in Little Rock is from the Midwest. You will hear some exotic accents, but very few of them will be southern. Miss Sherri and Miss Ibby said they were so thrilled to find each other. I was lucky enough to be adopted by them, and they have been more fun, and offered me more unconditional help and support that I could ever deserve.

When I first met Miss Sherri and Miss Ibby we talked about the Delta. I was still at Clemson then, and had no idea that I would ever write a thesis on the Delta. We just had common ground between us, and we shared a love of southern women authors. It was not long before we were swapping copies of books by authors like Ellen Gilchrist and Kaye Gibbons. When I did decide to pursue a master's degree, I knew exactly what I would study, and Miss Sherri and Miss Ibby were thrilled. Straightaway they started

thinking of ways to help me, and directions that my research could go in. They would say, “Have you thought about this...or this...?”

Because Miss Sherri and Miss Ibbey are in my mother’s age set, and because they all have similar backgrounds—being from the Delta, being teachers, having been raised in the Baptist church, having left the Baptist church upon leaving the Delta, and having left the Delta for a life elsewhere—the three of them have helped me immensely, and have served as a foil for the older generation of Deltans that did stay. I have gone to them countless times with questions, to make sure I was getting it right. They have been ever interested and ever supportive.

Chapter 3: Introducing the Arkansas Delta

Very early in my research on the Delta I came across a book written by James C. Cobb entitled *The Most Southern Place on Earth: the Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1992). I took the book home because it sounded like a good source. I was wrong. As has been so typical for discourse on the Delta, this book completely ignored the other side of the River. There was a map at the very beginning outlining the Yazoo Mississippi Delta in black, to the left was the River, and then...oblivion, I suppose. Arkansas was not even drawn into the map. The word *Arkansas* did not even appear in the index of the book. I returned it to the library.

For some reason the Arkansas Delta has been ignored by some people on the Mississippi side of the river, who equate the “Mississippi River Delta” with the “State of Mississippi Delta” (Foti 1993:41). This is not always the case, I know many people from Mississippi who are quite familiar with the Arkansas Delta, and would never seek to be exclusionary. However, for those that are of the opinion that the soil on the Mississippi side is sanctified Delta and that the Arkansas side is not, a simple geography lesson could enlighten them. As Foti (1993) points out, the Mississippi River is not a fixed geographic entity. “A river is constantly changing. A wise person realizes that one cannot step in the same river twice; the sage understands that once cannot step in the same river once. No matter how fine one splits the instant, there is motion, albeit often slow (30)...As the river gives, it takes. Always the river gives and takes” (31). Frequently what the river gives and takes is land. As the river changes course, land that was formerly property of

the state of Arkansas finds itself on the east side, and land that was formerly from Mississippi finds itself on the west side (Foti 1993). To quote Vivian, “How about *that!*”

The portion of the Mississippi Alluvial Plain located in Arkansas, known simply as the Delta, accounts for over ten million acres of land and one third of the seventy-five counties in the state. The Delta stretches from Eudora in the south, to Blytheville in the north, and in some places, as far west as Little Rock (Gatewood 1993). The Mississippi Delta itself has its widest point from Little Rock to near Memphis, where it stretches to 150 miles (Foti 1993). To say that the Delta has a large presence in the state of Arkansas is to indulge in understatement.

The Delta is defined by the flow and meanderings of such rivers as the Arkansas, the White, the St. Francis, and of course the Mississippi River. The Arkansas Delta consists of five distinct regions: the St. Francis Basin, Crowley’s Ridge, the White River Lowlands, the Grand Prairie, and the Arkansas River Lowlands (Foti 1993). The Western boundary of the Delta is very clear in Arkansas. From the Missouri state line down to Little Rock, the Ouachita and Ozark mountains rise sharply up from the river bottoms of the Delta, frequently hundreds of feet (Foti 1993). The region that my study focuses on is the Arkansas River Lowlands, the southernmost region in the state. Sweetwater is located in Chicot County, which comprises the extreme southeastern corner of the state. At one time Sweetwater held the title of “Okra Capital of the World.” These days Sweetwater refers to itself as the “Catfish Capital of the World,” a distinction it likely shares with a number of other towns in the region.

The visitor to the Delta may perceive the land as flat and monotonous. In some places there may only be a few feet of relief; however, a few feet may make the

difference between staying dry and getting wet during a flood. The topography of the Arkansas River Lowlands is quite flat, but there are a few high terraces. Macon Ridge (pronounced Mason in Sweetwater) is one such terrace (Foti 1993). Sweetwater is located along Macon Ridge. The ridge is low and flat enough that it has been cleared and farmed. If you want to see the ridge, you'll have to find someone to show it to you; it's not obvious, because it is very low. However, it is just high enough that during the devastating flood of 1927, many folks in town said that Sweetwater was the only dry land from Missouri to New Orleans. Stoddard and Vivian told me that the Red Cross set up camp at Sweetwater Baptist Church and people were boated in from outlying areas. Mrs. Campbell's family camped on the very spot where she and Harl would later own their house on Cashion Street.

The flood of 1927 was described as a great flood. Prior to this time there had been overflows of the natural levees, but those overflows were gentle floods, bringing only a few inches of water. The overflows were the river's natural way of reducing pressure (Foti 1993). The great floods did not come until the towering levees and dykes were built in the mid 1920's. Walker Percy pointed out that the tall levees confined the river, giving it no small ways of reducing pressure (Foti 1993).

The flood of 1927 came after a protracted period of unceasing rain. The water burst through the levees and created a "sickening yellow tide from Cairo, Illinois, to the Gulf of Mexico. Flood waters covered four million acres in eastern Arkansas, destroying millions of dollars of property and taking 117 lives" (Holley 1993: 260). According to Foti, the flood arrived over a period of thirty-six hours and lasted for four months. "...for thirty-six hours the Delta was in turmoil, in movement, in terror. Then the waters

covered everything, the turmoil ceased, and a great quiet settled down....Over everything was silence, deadlier because of the strange cold sound of the currents gnawing at the foundations, hissing against the walls, creaming and clawing over obstructions” (1993:48).

Another aspect of the Delta that has increased the severity of the floods is the extreme deforestation of the region. Next to the cotton industry, after the 1870’s, the developing lumber industry was the fuel for Delta growth. At that time the millions of acres of virgin forests seemed unlimited (Moneyhon 1993). The original Delta was filled with enormous stands of oak, gum, cottonwood, hickory, pecan, elm, pine, and cypress. Some of these trees were at least five hundred years old, and were of enormous size (Holley 1993:239). The timber companies that exploited the region showed no concern for replanting and growing replacement timber. The land from which all the trees had been extracted was frequently sold to farmers once its timber value was worthless (Holley 1993).

It was in the early decades of the twentieth century that the Delta’s physical landscape took on its present appearance. The virgin forests had disappeared entirely. “During the same period, drainage and flood control projects obliterated swamp and overflowed lands, and all of these efforts opened up vast new areas for agriculture” (Holley 1993:256). As for the lumber industry, “it did not change; it died” (Moneyhon 1993:233). However, over the last century enough trees have grown back to make additional cutting favorable for timber companies. There is a very large timber company/sawmill in Louisiana just south of Arkansas that always has huge stands of timber piled up with the sprinklers pouring water over the wood twenty-four hours a day

to prevent fires. The morning that Stoddard and Vivian took me fishing, the only sounds I heard was the rushing of the Mississippi River water, the honking and gasping death throes of the catfish we were catching, and the sound of trees being chopped down upriver from us.

Whatever effects the processes of change have made on the landscape of the Delta, it is still one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. The horizon is infinite; you feel that you could walk forever and never reach it. Time is slow, because nature makes the schedule. When I drive down from Little Rock along highway 65, I can feast my eyes on the landscape. There are only nine curves on the 140 mile drive; I know this because my mama counted them. You can see storms coming from hundreds of miles away, except at night when the black of the storm blends into the endless black of the massive sky. The ditches on the roadside have wild hibiscus growing in them with bright pink, yellow, and white blooms. Vines of Virginia creeper climb up over all of the telephone poles along side the highway, and transform utility into towering green sculpture bursting with orange trumpet flowers. If you are lucky enough to be driving along at just the right time of day, you will see the sun set, and this is like no sun set you have ever seen.

There was one sunset that I will never forget. In the summer of 1996 Mama and I had to go home to Sweetwater because we heard Teen had died. Teen, short for Ernestine, was the youngest daughter of my granddaddy's oldest brother. She was only eight years or so older than my mother. I loved Teen; she was so full of life. When my granddaddy was dying of cancer, sometimes Mama would take me over to Teen's house to play. Teen and her husband, William Lester, lived in Little Rock also. They had an

enclosed back porch that was full of good stuff. Once I found a box of little collapsible plastic cups topped with lids, and was so enraptured with them that Teen let me keep one. It was pink.

Teen was a teacher, a writer, and a poet. She always encouraged me to write; it never occurred to her that I might not have the talent. The last time I saw her was Christmas break of my freshman year of college. We talked all afternoon. She said that the women in our family write; we are a family of story tellers. I think about her all the time, she would have loved to know that I am writing about the Delta.

I didn't get to see Teen before she died. I heard she was sick, and a few days later she was dead. I didn't get to see Teen again until Mama and I walked hand in hand down the aisle of the Sweetwater Baptist Church. I stood there looking at her lying in the same spot where my granddaddy had lain fifteen years before, the same spot where my mama and daddy had said their vows. Teen looked beautiful. The cancer had been so fast acting that it had not wasted her. Her daughter-in-law Judy had done her hair and make-up just the way Teen liked it. The book *Always in Springtime* lay open on her chest, and her reading glasses were in her hand. She didn't look dead. She'd have liked that.

Teen's gravesite was across from my grandparent's house just like those of the rest of the family. During the burial I stood in fire ants. Digging the grave had disturbed countless nests, and the ants swarmed over the ground. I stood in that hot South Arkansas summer sun while those ants crawled on my legs and bit my toes and feet inside my sandals. I stood there and looked at my granddaddy's grave and across the street where no one lived anymore. All of the mourners stood still in the fire ants. It was

Teen's final moment. It wouldn't have done for us to be dancing there, even in pain.

Mama didn't feel well after the funeral, so I drove us back to Little Rock, barefoot.

That night when we were driving home there was a sunset the like of which I have never seen. Mama still calls it "Ernestine's sunset," and she wanted to know if I had written about it yet. Down in the Delta there are no mountains and very few trees to obscure the view, so it seems like you can see all the way to where the earth meets the sky. The whole sky opens up to you. It opened up that night as Mama and I were driving back to Little Rock.

Colors rained down on us. Orange, red, blue, purple – the colors dappled, slashed and raged across the sky. It was hers, Teen's. I'd never seen anything so glorious. The sun sank toward the earth like a huge fiery red ball. You'd think the land would burst into flame where the sun dropped past the horizon. And then it was gone, and all of the colors faded to gray, and then night.

There is great beauty in the Delta. There is richness, and color and life. There is beauty, and I'm not the only one who sees it. Sam Byrd (1942) described coming home to the South after living in New York. "There's something peaceful about sitting on the riverbank there and listening to the stillness around you. A young sycamore at the water's edge leans out over the river. The spring floods have left its roots standing out like the veins along the back of an old man's hand" (56). If the time of year is right, you might sit under a cottonwood and have a shower of wispy gossamer like blossoms rain down around you. The incomparable Tennessee Williams was from the Delta, and many of his works were set there in that golden landscape. Colby H. Kullman prepared a photo essay of the Delta in which he showed pictures portraying scenes described by

Williams in his work – “...scenes of the edge of the river ‘where giant cypresses seemed to engage in mute rites of reverence’ and views of the immense cottonfields that seem to ‘absorb the whole visible distance in one sweeping gesture’” (1999:126).

Chapter 4: Theoretical Perspective, Fieldwork and Etiquette

Theoretical Perspective

As an undergraduate I took courses in a number of different fields, such as women's studies, organic chemistry, Latin, biology of plants, physiology of the mind, history of art and architecture, vertebrate biology, and abnormal psychology. It was not until I took an anthropology course that I began to see the common thread of interest running through my seemingly disparate educational portfolio. Anthropology has a way of blending and bringing together ideas and perspectives. This is the reason I was drawn to anthropology, and this is also the reason that my theoretical perspective for this ethnography is a blending of concepts from prevailing schools of thought in Anthropology today: a blending of the modernist and postmodernist views, of traditional and new. My selection of theories from each paradigm is purposeful, not random. Leon Anderson (1999) suggests that we take that which is valuable from each paradigm, while avoiding their empirical and ethical traps. Indeed, to quote Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont (1999), "...one suspects that the social and academic elite members of the community of anthropologists never subscribed to anything quite as vulgar or artisan as a single scientific method or its equivalent" (467). I humbly seek to emulate the elite of my anthropological community by assimilating aspects of opposing theories.

My fieldwork is firmly grounded in the modernist tradition of actually being in the field, and engaging in participant observation. However, because I am writing about my family and the friends of my family, it is impossible for me to take on the role of the impartial observer. I am very much a part of this project. I am a part of the community I

studied, and I freely admit to any biases that my background and childhood may influence my work. Throughout the process of creating this thesis, I have grappled with certain bits of life, and certain stories: What to leave in, what to leave out? On some topics I have chosen to remain silent, and as this is my story I feel that I am in within my rights to do so. Anderson (1999) states that “ethnographers see through terministic screens, and their writings focus on some issues to the exclusion of others. In this, they are no different than any other social scientists—or any other writers” (453). When Elizabeth St. Pierre was writing about her own hometown in Georgia, she confronted the same problem of how to avoid dealing with certain issues. “I maintain that since we know in advance the probable audience for our work, we may be inclined to collect some data and not others” (St. Pierre 1999: 279). For permission to own my biases, I look to a man from whom I was able to learn directly: “Every ethnographer works with biases, some self-imposed, others unconscious. I am confident I have plenty of both. The ethnographic trick is not to factor out the biases, for that would factor out the ethnographer; rather the best strategy is not only to be aware of the biases but to utilize them in the research” (Richardson 1990:222).

Self-introspection and reflexivity have played a major role in the interpretation of my observations. According to Dennis Altman (2002) it is “safer... to avoid the personal....Safer, but in the end, I would suggest, less honest. If we are to engage with the social, we have an obligation to our readers, our colleagues and ourselves to be clear why we are researching and writing about a particular topic, and to provide sufficient personal explanation to allow a reader to understand why certain biases and choices seem

to emerge from the text” (321). I have taken Altman’s statement of obligation as a byword for my presence in this ethnography.

Due to the personal nature of my research I find it impossible to be completely modernist, but at the same time my firm belief in the importance of fieldwork and participant observation keeps me from delving too far into the postmodern paradigm. As per the suggestions of Adler and Adler (1999), I aspire to present work that is “somewhat influenced by the postmodern turn but relies fundamentally on studying people in situ, one of the hallmarks of early ethnography” (445). For the purposes of substantiating my theoretical perspective, I would like to set up a dialogue between the practitioners aligned with the more conservative descendants of the Chicago School and those favoring the postmodern genre.

In order for an ethnographer to speak with any authority about a chosen culture group, it is essential that she or he spend time in the field with the people whose lives she/he will attempt to interpret. Margaret Mead, quoted in Critchfield (1991) wrote that the traditional method of making an anthropologist was to “take someone by the scruff of the neck and leave him (or her) alone in a community in a strange culture. If he (or she) survived the experience of culture shock once, twice, three times, then he (or she) was an anthropologist. We did not know of any other way to make an anthropologist. We still do not” (190). The strength of ethnography comes from the research being “rooted” in real people interacting naturalistically with others (Adler and Adler 1999:445). The best advice that Shaffir (1999:677) can offer, which supports participant observation, is to simply “hang around.” While this may on the surface seem vague, it is the hanging around that allows the ethnographer to observe the culture in practice. In the community

I study there is a legitimized local activity available to insiders that is the equivalent to hanging around; visiting is one of the most loved southern practices. No one that I ever visited in Sweetwater thought it even passing strange that I would want to just sit and visit for hours on end. They would have thought it odd if I had not.

Clinton R. Sanders (1999: 672) formulated a wish list for ethnography in the next century. Among other things he wished for fewer “artsy-craftsy” ethnographies, and he wished for researchers to get back into the field. He expressed dismay at the postmodern trend of film criticism cultural commentary. He asks instead that people “...retain a method that centers on direct, disciplined, appreciative, analytic involvement with real people who are doing the best they can to make their way through the situations and interactions that constitute their everyday lives” (674). Takeyuki Tsuda (1998) echoes Sanders’ sentiments. Tsuda believes that the most effective fieldworker is socially engaged, actively involved with his/her informants, not a passive observer. This is the stance I have attempted to occupy in the course of my fieldwork.

The tricky question for me is where does the field end and where do my “rememories”--the term by Clough (1992) quoted in St. Pierre (1999) to describe people and places known, forgotten, and remembered again--begin? And to echo St. Pierre, does it really matter? “How does one think of relations and response outside a linear version of time, when one is lost in time?” (270). She could never be sure of where the line lay between what she was observing and the information that she had collected during her long-term ethnography that she had started as a child. When I am in a place that I have known as a child, I am seeing the past as well as the present. According to Richardson (1999:332), “Place has the characteristics of being experience-near. When we are in

place, we are embedded in the flow of being, a flow, often as not, so familiar that we scarcely recognize it.”

This is obviously the point in my journey where my perception takes a slight detour from the straight and narrow road of classical anthropology into the realm of the postmodern (where the roads seem quite curvy and the weather is hazy). I want this work to reflect the level of personal involvement and regard I have for the Delta and its people. I did not want this ethnography to resemble the type of ethnography that Mitchell (1996) describes as “...a mundane list of observations and notes, nearly formless, entirely fragmented” (159). I was ready to leave behind the memory of “clumsy, faltering fieldwork” and begin the “adventure of tale-telling” (Mitchell 1996: 159).

I wanted the emphasis to be less on writing essays and more on story-telling (Bochner 1999). According to Richardson, “Culture has moved ‘down’ from being an external superorganism and ‘out’ from being an interior cognitive structure to become discourse that we engage in to tell one another what we are up to” (1987:523). Dr. Richardson notes that the act of telling may be referred to as the narrative paradigm, or if one prefers (and he does prefer), telling stories. Gary Alan Fine (1999) suggests that a good ethnographer will be able to collect a trove of stories which he/she can use to create a narrative. My yearning to communicate through story-telling may be something that I come by quite naturally; as Margaret Jones Bolsterli (2000) says, “People from the lower South are frequently reminded by others of some of our more obvious differences, such as...the habit of seeing the world as material to be rearranged into stories” (3). Not having acquired this habit would have been a detriment to me in the field because, as Dr. Bolsterli (2000) points out, many southerners would just as soon read an encyclopedia as

talk to someone who is incapable of telling a story. Lea Barton (2002) has described her own work as both cultural commentary and southern story-telling. When speaking about the South, the former would not ring true without a healthy dose of the latter.

My inspiration for an ethnography written in a story-telling voice, filled with laughter and pain, and especially my love for the Delta came from the time I spent in class with Dr. Miles Richardson. Through Dr. Richardson's example I learned that there is a place for creativity and poetry in anthropology. I learned that one could be a scientist and still create beauty, that pain and reverence could be coupled with fieldwork to craft a poetic work through which a place and a people could emerge, richer in detail and more alive than those presented in the voice of the detached observer. I was able to hear Dr. Richardson's voice in person, as well as hear his voice in his writing. Firsthand, I was able to learn what Rodman (1993) experienced through a journal article, "I keenly remember reading Richardson's essay when it was first published in *American Ethnologist* in 1974. What an impression it made on me! There, in a professional journal, was a personal and passionate voice, so very different from the distanced, neutral tones I was taught to imitate in university, a voice with a wonderful, bracing intensity that was unafraid to rise to a fever pitch of exhortation. In a footnote to his article, Richardson states his belief that 'there is a place in professional journals for articles that make the reader grunt and say goddam'" (458). I can only try, with hands that look like my mother's and my grandmother's, to shape and craft my words to that the poetry and passion that I feel for the Delta and the lives of those I have known there can emerge.

Two practices of postmodern ethnographers that seemed flexible enough to encompass my research goals are autoethnography and interpretive ethnography. The

anonymous authors of “Fragments of Self at the Postmodern Bar” practice autoethnography, which as Norman Denzin describes it, is “ a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur” (253). Autoethnography allows the self to participate in the ethnography as a player, not merely an informed observer. A leading practitioner of postmodern ethnography, Denzin describes interpretative ethnography as being autoethnographic and vulnerable, where the ethnographer is seeking to embed the self in storied histories of sacred spaces. He suggests that the interpretive ethnography will disdain abstractions and high theory, choosing instead to fulfill higher, sacred goals (1999).

Beals, Spindler and Spindler (1973) pointed out that from its inception anthropology has faced the issue of disappearing subject matter. In the context of urgency, sometimes there was no time to formulate complicated theories and map out proper methodology ahead of time. Sometimes there was only the chance to “find some old people and say, ‘What was it like when you were young?’” (356). As it was in the beginning is now today. When I began my research, the white population of Sweetwater numbered around seven hundred people. In 2000 there were 393 (U.S. Census 2000). When I was in Sweetwater two weeks ago, two people died. Over the course of my research, four women whom I admired and wanted to work with have slipped away, including my sweet grandmother. I can no longer grab them and ask them what it was like when they were young. I can no longer ask them anything, and so many of my questions will remain forever unanswered. The lives of the white middle class in the south Arkansas Delta might not be sacred text to many, but it is sacred to me, and the

guidelines of interpretive anthropology allow me to preserve the stories of the generations of Delta residents that I could reach in time.

Fieldwork Methodology

My fieldwork has been conducted using traditional methods of participant observation espoused by James P. Spradley (1980), and I have used thick description (Geertz 1973) and reflexivity in the writing of the ethnography. I entered the Delta armed only with an inexhaustible supply of notebooks and time. I never used a tape-recorder because when I brought up the topic of taping them, it made people obviously uncomfortable.

Spradley (1980) contends that the ethnographer engaging in participant observation will differ in six ways from the typical cultural participant. The ethnographer must maintain a dual purpose, participating in group activities while watching the self and others at the same time. The ethnographer has to strive to be explicitly aware of things that others may take for granted. The ethnographer needs to try to take mental pictures with a “wide-angle lens” and look beyond a narrow scope of focus. The ethnographer will experience the feelings of being both an insider and an outsider at the same time. The ethnographer needs to engage in introspection to more fully understand the research experience, and finally, the ethnographer must keep an ethnographic record of both objective observations and subjective feelings (58). There are special challenges associated with meeting these ethnographic goals when studying one’s own culture. As an insider, there are taken-for-granted community assumptions and practices that are known to the ethnographer him/herself. I have tried to observe the comings and goings in Sweetwater with extra vigilance. Even as I am behaving in ways that come naturally to

me, I strive to turn the observer's eye on myself as well as on the community at large, so that I can *see* the culture, rather than only participating in it.

By following the suggestions of Spradley, I have been able to garner sufficient material to provide what I feel is a thick description of the Delta and its white middle class residents. Culture presents the ethnographer with contexts that can be thickly described (Geertz 1973). I have tried to provide as many layers of description as I can to make the landscape and people of the Delta become substantial and alive to the reader. I know that there are always more layers. What is at the bottom? What is at the core of the culture? Can you ever get there, even if it is the culture of your own family that was passed on to you?

One night when I was at my grandmother's house, when I was seven or eight, I took a big yellow onion out on the side porch. I didn't ask permission, I was just curious about what was inside the onion. I didn't even like onions, but I started peeling it. I sat out there for half of an hour, peeling that onion, and the only thing I ever found inside of it when I had peeled away every last layer was two little green sprigs in the middle. The ground around me was layered with onion skin, my hands stank, and I never figured out what was inside the onion. I didn't realize then that the layers were what made the onion. I thought that I could peel off the skin and find something inside, like a fruit, like an onion prize. I feel like I am once again peeling that onion, but I am now trying to pay more attention to the layers.

Many theorists have compared an anthropologist entering the field to a child. Beals, Spindler, and Spindler have suggested that the secret to fieldwork lies in the ability of the ethnographer to become like a little child, to learn as a child would learn, but to

pay attention and record what he learns. “Anthropological fieldwork is the science that every child knows but that most adults have forgotten” (1973: 39). Robertson (2002) has argued that no matter how many years of preparation have gone into a project, the anthropologist is still like a child at the onset of fieldwork because he/she is away from home, wandering around in a culture that he/she had not yet learned to navigate. To take on the role of a child was not a problem for me, because I was making my way through a culture that I have known only as a child and engaging for the most part with people who see me as a child. When I started visiting Stoddard and Vivian, I was twenty-three and they were just turning seventy. The fact that I wanted to learn from them, that I would look to them for wisdom and a sense of history is natural. What other role could I take on? They certainly wouldn’t take me seriously in any other role. I still feel like a child when I am in the Delta. I may be a married woman, but I will always be my mama’s youngest child, and Mrs. Campbell’s youngest grandbaby, working with a group of people who will always see me as such.

According to Robertson (2002), it is now taken for granted that a good ethnography will be reflexive. To be reflexive, one must turn the mirror back upon oneself. No longer would the narrator be an all-knowing invisible authority spewing out facts about a culture. The reflexive ethnographer would address his/her place in the field, how he/she may have affected the field, and how the field may have affected him/her. Shaffir (1999) believes that self-reflexivity in an ethnography regarding the whys and hows of the research provides a more honest account of how the ethnography was actually created.

I have no problem being reflexive. The effect on me of being in the Delta and with the participants is to make me feel closer to my family and to the land. I have tried not to make any ripples when I am in town, but it is never a secret that I am there. Everyone knows when someone has a visitor. I would hope that it makes Stoddard and Vivian, Aunt Lil, Miss Helen, and Miss Sarah proud for people to know that someone is in town visiting them, and that she is interested in their lives, and wants to hear all of their stories.

On *furta sacra*

Charles Lindholm (2002) has put forth a theory on the purpose of anthropology that I find both useful and hard to forget. In fact, I cannot erase the images he evokes from my mind. Lindholm described the process through which an object would become sacred by having the charisma from a magical sense of transcendence and participation channeled into it. Once an object became sacred, it became an object of worship, much coveted by like-believers. Lindholm told how in Medieval Europe, church practitioners would procure holy relics for their places of worship through *furta sacra*, or the “sacred theft” (332) of these objects from other churches or shrines. The later canonized Bishop Hugh of Lincoln was one of the most talented at the legerdemain of *furta sacra*. Upon being allowed to handle the arm of Mary Magdalene at a rival shrine, Bishop Hugh furtively bit off a finger and took it back to his church, where it can be seen today.

Lindholm suggests that “Like our curatorial cousins and priestly ancestors, anthropologists too have long been gnawers at the sacred, searching the world for authentic charismatic objects worthy of public display and admiration” (2002: 333). Unlike the curator who collected art or the priest who stole sacred objects, Lindholm says

the anthropologist has the chance to be more personally implicated in the search for transcendence because the relics and views sought by the anthropologist come from living people. In this way, during fieldwork, the anthropologist can do more than touch a relic second-hand; the anthropologist can penetrate directly into the realm of the sacred through the people embodying the wonder. Lindholm notes, “The sacred is where you find it” (2002: 337).

Tsuda (1998) told how at times he really needed a break from the demands of the field. He said some anthropologists will find a place, a private haven isolated from the field, where they can “reaffirm and maintain one’s true self and personal identity” (118). For me, this place would be the shed on my grandparents land. When Mrs. Campbell had to leave the Delta, I felt a part of my life was irrevocably lost, because I thought that my time there was finished. I couldn’t accept that I would never return, because I feel so alive there with every sense fully in motion. I couldn’t not be there, where most of my family lays at rest in the Mt. Carmel cemetery, where I have only to look into the sky to see my mother soaring overhead in her little plane, where I can still walk into the storage building on my grandparents land and see my granddaddy’s hat, waders, and duck decoys hanging on the wall, as if he had just arrived home from hunting and left his things hanging there as he walked into the house. That shed is one of my sacred shrines. I can commit *furta sacra* by pilfering out little objects of my granddaddy’s, like his hunting cap, a pair of his glasses left on the windowsill, or his padded aqua-colored cooler that he would sit on while fishing from the bank of the river. I could even gnaw on one of the wizened old turkey feet that still sit there as mute trophies of a great hunter, if I were so inclined. Mrs. Campbell’s house sits empty. It has

been robbed over and over until there is nothing left inside. It makes me sad, and I'm afraid to go in alone because there is evidence that someone has slept there--sheets on the floor, and empty beer cans. But I can still go into the shed, and for a moment be trapped in time, feel the possibility that, even for a second, I could step into the house and find all of my family there. My trips to the shed allow me to touch that which is sacred to me. Going into the shed is my ritual, a reenactment of steps I have taken since I was a small child. According to Richardson (1995:119), the reenactment draws attention to itself. The strength of the reenactment depends on how deeply one becomes "embedded in the transformation of the geographic 'where,' which we see, to the ineffable presence, which we touch."

Putting Myself in the Field

On my first official field trip up to the Delta, I left Baton Rouge around 3:00 in the afternoon. It is around 220 miles from Baton Rouge to Sweetwater. I headed north on highway 61, which switched to highway 65 at Natchez, Mississippi. Natchez is a very special town to me, because it is a place where I have spent considerable time with my mother, and with Mrs. Campbell. We went there just before she began to lose her vision. It was during the Christmas pilgrimage. We went to Longwood, the famous octagonal house, after dark. Although she couldn't really see the house, for years Mrs. Campbell would recall the glow from the thousands of Christmas lights that decorated the house. Driving through Natchez always puts me in the right frame of mind for my research. It makes me think of good times with my family, and it makes me nostalgic. Turner (Anonymous 1997), has traced the concept of nostalgia back to its seventeenth century roots. The literal meaning of nostalgia is *homesickness*. Natchez takes me back in time.

Once I've passed Natchez I basically follow the Mississippi river straight up to Arkansas. Sweetwater is the first town in the extreme southeast corner of the state. I love the drive. I love the wide expanse of rolling farmland on either side of the highway, with row after row of cotton and soybeans, narrowing into a single row running into infinity along the horizon. Little towns pop up along the way, Vidalia, Ferriday – birthplace of cousins Jerry Lee Lewis, Mickey Gilley, and Jimmy Swaggart. I feel a particular connection to Swaggart, as I would hear his rich voice on the television Sunday mornings at Mrs. Campbell's house. No one would usually be watching though; everyone would be in the kitchen. It was not that our family necessarily loved Brother Jimmy, it was that Sissy loved Channel 7, and woe unto the person who changed the channel. From Vidalia up to Waterproof, where I was pulled over for speeding by Assistant-Chief Harold Short, who promptly let me go without a citation when I offered him my father's Arkansas State Police business card. From Waterproof to Transylvania, then Tallulah, and Lake Providence. And then only twenty five miles to home. When I cross the state line from Louisiana into Arkansas I have reached my destination. It is late afternoon, my favorite time of day. The sun is burning red and growing ever larger as it sinks low in the western sky over the carefully manicured rows of farmland, and the cicadas are just beginning to sing.

I arrive at Stoddard and Vivian's house long after they have eaten dinner, yet they have held food for me. This time I did not arrive hungry, I said that I would have a piece of toast before I went to bed. The next morning I was not hungry either, I had toast again. This distressed them to such an extent that they called my mother to let her know I was not eating. It is kind of hard to feel like a serious social scientist when your

informants call your mama and tell on you. To quote Erving Goffman, in Tsuda (1998), “I had serious problems with ‘impression management’” (114).

That night we sat up talking, as I tried to explain my research goal. Stoddard and Vivian understand anthropology perfectly. They’re still not sure why I think it’s so wonderful to sit around all day with older people and listen to their stories and watch as they go about their daily activities, but they know I am sincere in my interest and in my affection. Vivian was able to define anthropology and my position as an anthropologist in a perfect, precious way. Few words have ever pleased me more. Her account of me came about during the semester I was there doing research on the Sweetwater Baptist Church. There are only a few churches in town, and the Sweetwater Baptist Church is the “Big Church.” I wrote my paper at the end of the semester and gave them a copy. Little did I know the paper would get handed around the church for the whole congregation to peruse. Learning this fact caused me to choke and lose my breath for a moment. What had I written? What had I said about the congregation? About the pastor? I remembered that I at least said something like if he hadn’t experienced heaven on earth he obviously hadn’t ever eaten my grandma’s turkey and dressing. It was at this point that I began to really think about who would be reading what I am writing, and how they might feel about it. Vivian explained my paper to all of her friends. She said, “This is Susan, an outsider, well, she’s not really an outsider, since her family is from here, but she didn’t grow up here, so she’s sort of an outsider, and this is her, looking at us, and telling us how she sees us.” I don’t know that I’ve ever heard it said better.

My mother’s cousins have opened their home to me over the last five years, and welcomed me into their lives. They have shared their memories and the patterns of their

every day lives with me. I could not have done this research without them, because they are my family in Sweetwater. After we had to take my grandmother out of the Delta, I despaired of ever being able to go back. Stoddard and Vivian gave me that opportunity as often as I have needed it. They have fed me and housed me and looked after me. Since they are my cousins, as well, I had always known and loved Stoddard and Vivian, but I have come to appreciate them in new ways over the last five years. I can only hope that they will recognize the regard I have for them when they read this ethnography.

Incidentally, two weeks ago Stoddard asked me if I was going to finish writing my thesis while he is still alive, so he can read it.

On Etiquette

Even having my family as town natives, and having spent much of my life in Sweetwater, there was still much town etiquette that I didn't know, especially that pertaining to an adult, specifically to an unmarried woman. The practices of my family were just that, and I quickly learned new rules. The rules that I had taken for granted most of my life that were appropriate for interaction with my family as a unit suddenly didn't fit when I was alone, traveling through the Delta, visiting on my own with people whom I had previously known only in a family context. I had to take what I already knew, and glean from my observations of other people's behavior and their reactions to me, in the process of visiting without the rest of my family, how I needed to act.

Harl died when I was six. I was the youngest of his grandchildren, and my mother was the youngest of his children. As such, neither Donna nor I were ever excluded from any of his activities. He took me hunting and fishing, for rides on the levee, and when he joined the other men in town for morning coffee. Every morning,

many men in town would gather together at the Capri Sands Café for coffee. The men included merchants, farmers, and politicians. I thought it was fun. I loved to be with my granddaddy and ride around in his big dusty pick-up truck, watching his pack of Red Man chew slide back and forth across the dashboard. My mother was unusual, in that she was incredibly beautiful and feminine, but also a talented sportswoman. She could shoot anything, drive anything, and eventually she would fly. She was a Daddy's girl, so she also was often the only girl along on otherwise manly pursuits. As my mother's daughter, she was my example. We were used to being with the men. Therefore, it didn't occur to me at first that many social aspects of life in the Delta would be gender specific, but I learned.

On one of my trips up from Baton Rouge I arrived around 5:00 in the evening. I asked Vivian what she and Stoddard had been doing that day. She told me, and she said that Stoddard and several other men I am familiar with had sat in the front yard for much of the afternoon talking. One of the men was Dudley Baxter, who was a very good friend of my grandfather's. He gave the eulogy at Granddaddy's funeral, and I would have loved to have talked with him. I said that I was sorry I had missed that because I would have enjoyed sitting with them while they talked. Vivian looked at me as if I were a little strange and said I wouldn't have been able to sit with them because that was just menfolk's time. It was just that simple.

The men have their times when there are only men. Morning coffee, fishing trips, hunting, working on the church; these are all activities that the men do. I believe many of them used to gather down at the hardware store to talk and play dominoes; maybe they still do. Gathering at the hardware store is the mirror opposite gender image from what

you will see at Lil's store on the other end of Main Street. Lil's has been the gathering place for women in town for over forty years, and the only man you will see there is her husband occasionally passing through. He only stays long enough to kiss cheeks and say hello and he is out the back door. You will also be hard-pressed to find a man at the Beauty Shop or at one of the Baptist Women's Missionary Union gatherings. I didn't learn any of this until my grandparents were gone from the Delta, because our family was a little bit different. My mother accompanied my grandfather on all of his outings because he doted on her. And my grandmother owned and managed a concrete business, which was full of men. By necessity she moved in the men's world.

During my fieldwork, I learned a little bit of etiquette about visiting. Visiting is fun, and people love to receive visits, but visits have to be conducted in a careful manner. Many times I would go to Sweetwater and only see Vivian and Stoddard. That was fine, because they are my family. Sometimes, I would go to Lil's, and again, that was fine, because Lil's store is a neutral public place where I would stand a good chance of running into other ladies. The rules of visiting etiquette would come into play if I made home visits to one or another lady in particular who was not kin. No one ever said anything to me about it, but I could just feel that it would be very rude of me to stop by and visit with Mrs. Helen Rutledge, and not stop to see Mrs. Sarah Macy. It's not like one or the other wouldn't know I had been there. They talk every day. I felt that if I were to visit one and not the other I would risk hurting the feelings of whomever I did not visit, and risk appearing impolite to both. Both Miss Helen and Miss Sarah were important friends to my family, and I could not play favorites. Sometimes I would think

about getting them together, but I never did. I felt that this would appear as a contrivance and make me look like I did not have sufficient time to pay a visit to each lady.

Time was frequently a difficult issue with me. Stoddard and Vivian have a daily routine that they follow closely. They eat dinner at noon, and supper at five. It would be very rude of me to upset this routine. Not that they would mind, nor would Vivian have minded me heating my lunch up later, but the least I would do was make it to meals on time. This meant that my other visits needed to be conducted between meals, during the day. After supper, the white residents of Sweetwater don't really leave the house very often. Everyone settles in to watch television or read, they go to bed early. So my visits needed to be conducted between meals, in the daytime. Besides, nighttime was my time with Stoddard and Vivian for our good story telling. During the day I would run around visiting other people.

Meeting a Mentor

A few months ago I had the great pleasure to meet Margaret Jones Bolsterli. She is a retired professor of English from the University of Arkansas. I have long admired her work. Two of her books, *Born in the Delta*, and *Vinegar Pie and Chicken Bread* have been of particular help to me in my research. She is a native of Desha County, in the heart of the Delta. I had wanted to meet her for five years, just to talk with her and let her know how much her work meant to me.

I know Dr. Bolsterli's niece, Melinda. She and my mama work together. In fact, Melinda sent home a copy of *Born in the Delta* for me to read the summer before I started graduate school when she found out that I would be researching the Delta. When I decided to go up to Fayetteville in January of this year to do some research, I called

Melinda to see if she thought her aunt would meet with me. Melinda said that she thought it would be fine. She gave me her aunt's phone number, and then offered to call her first, to introduce me, and say that I would be calling the following day. Then she changed her mind and decided she would call her daddy, who is Margaret's brother, and have him call her, because he always liked an excuse to call his siblings. The next day my mama called me and said Melinda had stopped by her office that day to tell her that she had talked to her daddy, and he had talked to Dr. Bolsterli, and that she would be expecting me to call that night. This roundabout method of getting acquainted is pretty typical for southern culture. Nobody wants to meet a stranger. People who know you or are related to someone you want to know are generally pretty happy to pave the way for you, and it provides you with some legitimacy through demonstrating that the mediator knows you or your people. Within the rules of visiting etiquette, it would have been rude of me to just call Dr. Bolsterli out of the blue, and I would not have been comfortable doing so in any case. Had Dr. Bolsterli not been retired, I would have felt comfortable contacting her at the University as a fellow academic. The fact that she is retired meant that I was now treading into her personal time, and I felt that having Melinda intercede on my behalf was the more polite thing to do.

I called Dr. Bolsterli that night and asked her if she would be available to talk for a while sometime over the weekend. She said that would be fine, and since she lived thirty miles outside of Fayetteville on a farm she said she would meet me at the library, because she had the time, and I needed to be there doing my research. I liked her already. "I will meet you at the circulation desk at the library at 1:00." So we did.

I recognized her from the pictures on her books, but I likely would have known her anyway. She looked the way she talked – purposeful. She was tastefully dressed, wearing a pair of gray slacks and a red turtleneck sweater. She wore a lovely pendant around her neck, and she had a ring on her right hand that my eye was constantly drawn to. It was a large ring, with a silver fish, like a koi, wrapped around a round cut chunk of topaz or amber. She walked in and looked around. When I stood up and walked toward her she said, “Are you Susan?” I said, “Yes, Ma’am.” She asked, “Well, how can I help you, Susan?” I wasn’t sure how to answer her directly. I told her that she had already helped me immeasurably, with her books. I just wanted to meet the woman whose work I had long admired. So we sat down and passed the most southern of all past times – we visited.

I enjoyed that visit immeasurably, and enjoyed the irony of it as well. In *Born in the Delta*, Dr. Bolsterli discusses the southerner’s penchant for telling stories in lieu of having an actual conversation. She said that it wasn’t until she went north that she actually had direct, non-circular conversations. She and I talked. We talked about my thesis, and she asked me excellent, no-nonsense questions about my research and my experiences in the Delta. She shared some very pertinent observations about Delta women, and the difficulties of writing about your own culture. But I have to tell you, there was a lot of story telling in there, on both our parts.

We swapped stories, we answered a story with a story, and we illustrated points with stories. I really tried to stay on the direct conversation path, to show her that I could, and that I was capable of having a direct conversation, but I’m not really good at it, and the urge was just too strong, I had to tell some stories. And every southerner

knows that the only way to answer a story is with a better story, so we had a good time. We were so typical, and Roy Blount Jr. says “Southerners get a charge out of being typical” (Reed 1985).

On Placemaking

One of the aspects of Delta people discussed by Willard Gatewood (1993) is that they attach special significance to place, in both a physical and social sense. It is important for Delta people to know who someone is, where they are from, and who their family is – with great specificity. The phrase “in their place” has frequently been used in a racist context, but “the fact is that Delta people insist on everyone being in his or her place” (24).

My place has been redefined for me many times by people I have met in Sweetwater who knew my family but not me. When I am in town, and I meet people who don’t know me personally, they will make a place for me where I fit into their lives, and then they know me, like they have always known me. For instance, I will be introduced as Mrs. Campbell’s grandbaby, or Donna Campbell’s baby. At that point, whomever I am meeting will tell me a quick story about how they knew my family. I have met former neighbors of my grandparents, and women whose children were taught by my parents. I even discovered a cousin I didn’t know I had at a Christmas bazaar hosted by the Baptist Women’s Missionary Union. I have been stopped on the street and in the grocery store and asked if I am Donna’s daughter, because I have my mother’s face. Once people know who I am, they visibly relax; they seem comfortable with me. I feel like I belong, and they remember me the next time I’m in town.

One story in particular comes to mind about how I was made to feel comfortable. I was at the beauty shop. I probably felt the least comfortable there out of anywhere in town. I was just sitting there in a chair by the door, closest to the chair of the owner, Betty Jo, listening. I didn't know any of the women coming in or going out. They were too polite to ask who I was; they would just kind of stare at me and my notebook, which was sitting conspicuously open on my lap. When Betty Jo noticed them looking at me she would say "this is Susan, she's Mrs. Campbell's – you remember Mrs. Campbell, she owned Mobile Concrete out on the highway - grandbaby. She's writing a paper about Sweetwater for school." That satisfied everyone. Most ladies would comment that they knew my grandma and ask how she was, how Sissy was. Many of their children had had one or both of my parents as teachers. Sweetwater is a very small town. When they were first married, before my brother and I were born, my parents taught in the school there. My mama taught English and my daddy taught history and civics. It is a good bet that most of the students passing through in the early seventies were in one of their classes.

However, one lady had a much more specific story to tell me about my mother and her daughter. Mama had not only taught her daughter, but she had also apparently imparted a sage piece of advice that still tickled this lady almost thirty years later. The advice concerned the proper course of action to take if one must pass gas in a crowded class room. Most women I know would rather clench every orifice of their bodies and explode internally rather than pass gas in public, my mother included. However, according to the lady at the beauty shop, Mama counseled her daughter that if she were to pass gas in the class room, the best thing to do was to look around the room in an accusatory manner, as if trying to figure out who would be so common as to lose control

in such a manner. My grandma had a different strategy. As she got older, sometimes little popping sounds would follow her on her journey around the house. She would always say “Oh!” in a very surprised tone, and wave her hand behind her and mutter “Cat.” I could never figure out why, and neither could Mama.

On Returning to One of My Childhood Places

On a recent trip to Baton Rouge, my husband Robert, our dog, and I left Little Rock before three o’clock in the morning. We passed through Sweetwater just after five o’clock; dawn would not break for some time yet. I knew that Stoddard was probably walking around town with the widow ladies, but we didn’t have time to stop because I had appointments in Baton Rouge. I knew I could have found him though; there aren’t that many streets that he could be on. He’d be easy to spot with his white hair and his great height.

On our way back up through Sweetwater three days later, I made my husband stop the car at Mobile Concrete. In the spring the weeds grow up so tall that I can’t get to the front door. I wanted to take some pictures while I could see the whole building. While I was out of the car I decided to walk around back. The first thing I did was to just stand there and smell. If I close my eyes and smell I am taken back to another time. I could see the huge circles, patterns on the land in the back where the mammoth piles of sand and gravel had stood for half a century. There were still traces of sand and gravel littering the ground in circle shapes.

I originally had no intention to trespass, I just wanted to walk around and feel, feel what it was like to be there again. I could never do it alone because it wasn’t safe to be there by myself, but with Robert and our dog, Johnnie Walker, in the car I could walk

around to my heart's content. How strange I must have looked to them, standing, moving in circles with my eyes closed, breathing in deeply.

The plant has been abandoned for a number of years. As I said, I didn't intend to trespass, but the back door of the garage was gone. Gone. There was nothing to keep me out. I stood and looked at the opening, and then looked at my car for a minute, and then slipped inside the building.

I slipped back into my childhood. The smell was exactly the same; oil and dust and cinderblock. Cinderblock buildings have a kind of cold smell; even in summer time the inside of the garage would smell cool somehow, while outside the still heavy air would hover around 100 degrees. The building was abandoned, but not empty. There were still oil stains on the floor. There was a shelf by the door leading to the office that still had spark plugs and various engine components sitting on it. The bathroom was open. I had remembered the layout of the fixtures wrong. The odor of disinfectant tablets still lingered in the tiny room with the window facing the batch plant in the side yard.

The office smelled the same. The two store front windows were still intact, though one was cracked, and both were covered with ten years of dust. I could still see the long faded stencil marks of the company logo that had been painted on the right window. The wooden chest-high counter still stands on the right side of the office, with my grandmother's metal desk still sitting behind it.

When I was little there was an old fashioned coke cooler in the middle of the office. It was the kind that had the glass door on the left side, with the bottles lying on their sides in layers. You would open the door, and grasp a bottle by its cold glass neck

to pull it out. The glass would scrape across the cold metal and make a loud rasping sound. There was a bottle opener on the front, with a metal box inside the machine to catch the bottle tops. When I was bored my Grandma would open the cooler and take out the box and let me sort the bottle caps. The box was always sticky; it smelled of cold metal and sweet syrup sap from Coke, Sprite, Dr. Pepper, and Sunkist Orange that had co-mingled there over the years. The caps were sticky also, but that did not deter me from my task. I was generally sticky too, or dusty, or streaked with dirt. Sometimes Grandma let me play with the money from the machine as well. The money was not usually sticky, unless I handled it, but it was cold.

There was also a free-standing gas heater in the office. It was gray metal and had the porcelain decorative grill at the bottom where I could watch the blue flames dance. There was a small ditch behind the plant where the men would dump out the water they would mix in the cement trucks after a job to remove the excess cement. When we would come in with feet wet and crusted with rapidly drying cement from playing in and near the ditch, my brother and I would have to spread our socks and shoes in front of the heater to dry, as well as warm our feet there. There would always be a hot patch of floor there in front of the heater, the only patch of warmth on an otherwise cold concrete floor.

The drink cooler and the heater are gone, as is my granddaddy's desk, which sat at the opposite side of the room of grandma's. I remember him sitting there, with his chair tilted back toward the wall and his feet on the desk in his cowboy boots. He didn't do much work there, but he did a lot of socializing. A cup of coffee and an ashtray might be the only things on his desk, while grandma's desk was covered with a desk pad calendar, invoices, receipt books, phone, pens, and one of those vicious spikes that you

impale receipts on when you're done with them. The office was her official domain, and the plant and the job-sites were Harl's.

I was afraid to stay long. I didn't want to get in trouble for being inside the building, but I am so glad that I went in. I had wanted to for years. I remembered so much, and standing inside brought it all back to me in proper scale. It also made me horribly sad. When I started this thesis, Mrs. Campbell was alive, as were many others who I had hoped to work with. As I write now, so many of my words are about loss, and heavy with grief. Writing about their lives reminds me of their deaths. This was not the original intent of my research. But time is cruel, and I have taken too much of it, and some of my ladies have slipped away from me.

Chapter 5: Violence and the Church

Two oft-mentioned aspects of southern culture are violence evangelical Protestantism. I have chosen to discuss these topics both in relation to southern culture in general, and as they pertain to the Delta in particular.

Violence

In the South, violence is a part of the culture. There is an underlying possibility that any situation could erupt into violence without much provocation, as if southern culture has a still-water shimmering quality, under which violence lays, waiting to rise up out of the deep and explode. Margaret Jones Bolsterli describes the anticipatory quality of violence in the South as follows: “There is a possibility in the South that violence will occur at any time, in any place – a possibility that I do not believe exists to such an extent in those other areas” ([the middle west, northwest and northeast][2000: 55]).

According to Richard E. Nisbett and Dov Cohen (1996), four major reasons have been offered for the southern tendency toward violence: a relationship between warm climate and hot temper, the tradition of slavery, the relatively greater poverty of the South, and a putative “culture of honor.”

I have never lived anywhere but in the South; I don’t have anywhere personally to compare it with. I know what I feel, and what I have experienced. I do know that there is violence, sudden horror-filled moments where anything can happen, even the unthinkable. It’s a feeling you grow up with: you look out at the landscape around you and know that something sinister may lay in wait. Stillness is sinister. The southern climate contributes to the feeling of waiting, anticipating what may happen. I know the

“long hot summer” is not just a saying, it’s a fact. You can feel something in the summer, the heat surrounds you and pounds, throbs, like the heart of the earth is beating, and you have only to wait a while until someone succumbs to the wildness and the lure of violence. According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996), it is indeed possible to show that variation in temperature in a locality is associated with the number of violent crimes there, although they favor the southern “Culture of Honor” as the main explanation for violent behavior on the part of southern men and women.

There are certain mores in southern life that build this culture of honor. In order to deter conflict, a man must display a willingness to commit mayhem, as well as risking his own life and limb. A man must be constantly on guard against insults of any kind. If a man allows himself to be insulted, he may give the impression that he is not strong enough, or cannot protect what is his. Anthropologists call this kind of culture a “culture of honor,” where honor is the sense of status and power (Nisbett and Cohen 1996). Dr. Bolsterli (2000) talked about what she *knew* would be the results of certain types of behavior on her part. “The trouble in the South is that there is a terrifying possibility that one’s relatives or acquaintances will feel called upon to do violence. I was constantly warned about putting myself in a situation where that might happen....If this should happen, it was implied, my father would have to ‘do something about it’”(60).

This culture of honor is not supported only by the behavior of the men. According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996), women are clearly very much a part of all cultures of honor – teaching it to their sons, enforcing it on their menfolk, and, quite often, participating in its violent behavior patterns themselves. They quoted an old veteran of the Civil War, who was once asked why southern soldiers had fought so bravely and so long after it had

become apparent that they would be crushed by the North. “We were afraid to stop....Afraid of the women at home....They would have been ashamed of us” (87).

I grew up surrounded by guns. My father has worked in law enforcement since before I was born. Today he is a drug enforcement agent for the federal government. When I was a little girl he worked for the Arkansas State Police. My daddy is constantly armed. He does not go anywhere without at least one gun tucked in his back. When I was four or five years old he would come home after work and take off his guns, an arsenal of them. He would wear a leg holster on each calf, his shoulder holsters would cross his back under his blazer, and there would always be a gun at his hip or in his back waistband. I never thought there was anything strange about this.

I learned to shoot a gun when I was about five, as did my mama because her daddy was an avid hunter. When we used to go out on the levee of the Mississippi river to shoot at cans and match books for target practice, Mama was the best shot. This is not unusual; lots of southern women can shoot. Dr. Bolsterli (2000) recalled, “the brothers taught me to shoot by the time I was eight, and when I was ten, I was allowed to take the twenty-two out alone” (25).

When we were in high school, my father gave my sister a stun gun to carry with her in her purse. When I left for college, my gift was a thirty-eight caliber five shot revolver. “College boys carry their guns to college with them...”(Bolsterli 2000: 56), and sometimes college girls do too.

I went to college in South Carolina. I was eighteen and driving by myself through Memphis, Birmingham, and Atlanta – often at night. The thought of my being alone driving long distances scared my father, and it made him feel better to know I was armed.

He gave me a revolver because they never jam. The gun only has five shots, but I'd never have to mess with a safety or a jammed clip. He also equipped me with five hollow point bullets that he assured me could "blow a hole the size of a barn door" in anything I chose to shoot at. He always told me that if anyone ever tried to hurt me I was to shoot them, never to hesitate. He said if I pulled out my gun I would have to use it or I might have it snatched out of my hands and turned on myself. He said, "If you're in danger, just shoot. We'll worry about everything else later."

Mrs. Campbell had a gun. I can remember seeing it from my earliest days, because it was always within my reach, loaded. It was quite a thing, a forty-five revolver, chrome, inlaid with ivory. It was big and it was shiny. In the day time it sat on the top of the large brown wooden sewing machine cabinet in the hallway. At night Mrs. Campbell kept the gun on her bed-side table. At bed time, she would carry a glass of water and her gun into her bedroom.

Occasionally, groups of young men would come up on her porch late at night and knock on the door. They would ask to come inside and use her phone. In answer she would open the curtains on the door, tap her gun on the glass and tell them to get off her property. She was not scared of them; that was her property and she would defend it.

I was there one night when it happened. A long, narrow porch ran along the side of the house, and two of the bedrooms had windows that opened onto the porch. There was a screened door that would scrape on the concrete floor and then close with a bang when someone walked onto the porch. In the middle of the night I heard voices and then the "scrape....bang" of the screened door. Then I heard knocking on the glass window of the kitchen door. I heard my grandmother talking in a low voice, and I walked out into

the hallway. She was already on her way back to bed with the forty-five held at her side, half covered by the folds of her nightgown. She wasn't scared, so neither was I, and we both went back to sleep.

This experience of mine could be compared to a scene from Dr. Bolsterli's childhood where she lay awake one night because she had misunderstood a child telling her father that the child's father had a gun and was going to shoot the child's family. Dr. Bolsterli thought the child's father was threatening to shoot her family, and she could not sleep for the fear. She said she lay in the dark hoping to hear "...the right noises of reassurance. I would have been comforted by hearing the action of my father's pump gun or the click of shells sliding into the chamber of his double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun....If I could expect the threat of violence, I expected to be protected from it by violent means" (2000: 62).

I have already mentioned Stoddard's armed morning walks with the widow ladies. Originally he carried an antique revolver that had not been fired for decades. Vivian wanted me to tell him not to carry it, that he'd probably shoot himself in the foot with it. That Christmas, his sons bought him a new gun, a snappy little semi-automatic pistol that fits nicely in his pocket and has a safety. He was proud to show it to me, because he knew I'd be interested.

On a recent trip to the Delta I was visiting with Mrs. Sarah Macy. I find her to be one of the most intelligent women I know, and, she does love to have a direct conversation. Sometimes she'll catch me in the middle of a thought and just dive in with a straight look-you-in-the-eye serious question. It usually takes me a minute to think of an answer. I know that if I want straight talk in town, I can go to her. But don't get me

wrong, the woman can tell a mean story, as well. We talked about the prospects of war in Iraq, and then we talked about the state of the world. She said, “I just don’t know, Susan...” and she sighed. This seemed to me like a good time to ask about local violence.

I asked if anyone else in Sweetwater had been attacked in the same manner as the gentleman who was smashed in the head with a rock, the event which had precipitated Stoddard arming himself for his morning walks. Miss Sarah said that no one had been hit with a rock again, that now men were being attacked from behind in their carports and pushed into their own houses and mugged. I have heard no stories of women being attacked.

In an unfortunate twist of fate, the brother-in-law of the man concussed with the rock was also mugged. I asked Miss Sarah if he was hit with a rock, and she said, “No, they didn’t hit him with a rock, they just pushed him into his house and pistol-whipped him a little bit around his head before they robbed him.” Just pistol-whipped him a little bit.... The “casual recounting of a violent tale” seems to highlight that “peculiar quality of violence that lies just under the surface of even the most civilized parts of southern society” that Dr. Bolsterli has tried to describe to her northern friends (2000: 57).

Another reason suggested by Nesbitt and Cohen (1996) supporting the southern penchant for violence is that southerners are more likely to own guns and hence to have ready access to a lethal weapon if they become angered. A National Opinion Research Council surveys show that about two-thirds of southern white men own guns, whereas only about fifty percent of northern white men do. The implication was that more of the northern men considered their guns useful only for sport, while the southern men saw

their guns as a means of protection. Dr. Bolsterli described how southern farmers routinely carry firearms in their pick-ups, and those guns are not for show; they are there “in case of trouble” (2000: 56).

John Shelton Reed, in his work *One South* (1982) discusses how southerners may take for granted certain types of actions that they may even consider to be natural and hence not consider them to be violent at all. These actions might include so-called lawful violence, which is violent action locally considered to be acceptable in the context of protection of one’s home, family, or personal honor. The redefinition of some violent actions as lawful may explain how southerners can live in a region where the homicide rate is twice as high as anywhere else in the country, yet not even recognize that they live in a violent society. This seemed reasonable to me, so I wanted to discuss it with my friend, Alan, who is from South Carolina.

I asked Alan if he thought there was a penchant for violence in the South, or if southerners were more quick to be violent than other cultures. He said no, he really didn’t think southerners were particularly violent. This is the same boy, who, only a few weeks earlier immediately sprang into action after receiving a hysterical call from his girlfriend saying that someone was trying to break into her apartment. He grabbed his own shotgun, shoved a pistol into my husband Robert’s hands, and the two of them sped downtown and pulled in at her apartment before the police had even arrived. Reed (1993) said that a policeman once gave him a reason that burglaries are typically less common in the South, except in the richest areas. “Going in other people’s windows is a more dangerous occupation in the South, he argued. ‘You’re more likely to meet

something lead coming out.””(13). Luckily, the intruder was gone by the time the boys, and the police, arrived.

The Church

The prevalence of evangelical Protestantism is frequently cited as a main descriptor of the South. According to Reed (1993), about ninety percent of white southerners identify themselves as Protestants, and at least half of those are Baptists, with Methodists and Presbyterians accounting for the largest part of the difference. Charles Reagan Wilson (1995) calls these denominations “The Big Three,” and he says that the distinctiveness of southern religion comes from the domination of the big three and the combination of traits that they display, including: an evangelical nature, fundamentalism, moralism, and expressiveness. Wilson feels that the most important aspect of southern religion is the experiential—being born again, being touched by the Holy Spirit and cleansed. The dynamic of evangelicalism is conversion. It is about “getting right with God” (1995:8).

There is no doubt as to the powerful presence of the Baptist church in southern culture. H.L. Mencken, in Wilson (1995: 140), in his understated and good natured way, said that the South was a “cesspool of Baptists,” and that “sometimes it has seemed like they have been more common than mosquitoes in Louisiana.” Taking a different view, Flannery O’Connor (Wilson 1995:175) said that the South was “Christ-haunted.”

According to Gatewood (1993:11) the Arkansas Delta was even more “monolithically Protestant than the South in general.” Hubbell (1993) supports this notion by stating that all Delta people, Protestant and non-Protestant, take their religion seriously. While the Delta is overwhelmingly Protestant, there are Catholic and Jewish

communities in the region, as well as other faiths. Within a social community, the church communities often seek to clarify and enforce the morals of the community at large. In addition to addressing the moral good, the church in a small town community can also serve as a major social outlet for residents. Attending church therefore can serve a vital mechanism for developing and maintaining local friendships (Liu et al. 1998).

Dr. Bolsterli (2000) has another view on religion in the South that I find particularly interesting. She states that one must understand that religion in the South is different than in most other places – “there it is as pervasive and persistent as the heat and humidity of summer” (89). Life in the Delta can be very harsh, and religion can be seen as a kind of buffer, where faith could mean the difference between living in despair or living in serenity and hope.

Dr. Bolsterli also theorizes that the origins of the particular stringency of southern evangelical Protestantism may have something to do with the lushness of the landscape. “I am certain that the southern founding fathers hit on that religious negation of pleasure as a counterweight to the prevailing sensuous atmosphere, because they feared a culture given up to the voluptuousness that was natural in such a climate....The mixture, on that heavy air, the scents of magnolia, honeysuckle, wisteria, and a strange musk exuded by the armyworms as they ate the new cotton blossoms gave such an erotic tone to summer nights that a strong opposing force had to be exerted to keep us from a life abandoned to pleasure” (Bolsterli 2000:91).

Although I have been raised as an Episcopalian, my mother was raised Baptist, and when we went home I would go to Sweetwater Baptist Church, usually with Stoddard and Vivian. My family were members of the church for many years, and it has

always been special to me. In the spring of 1999, I spent considerable time there working on an independent study project. Blacks and whites worship separately in Sweetwater, and the congregation of Sweetwater Baptist is white. There are many black churches in town. First Baptist Church of Sweetwater is black, and there is a beautiful modern African Methodist Episcopal church, larger than any other in town, that was built with money willed from a man who was originally from Sweetwater, who had died while living in California. At one time, there were strong white Presbyterian and Methodist churches in town. Many years ago, the Presbyterian Church closed, and some of the Presbyterians started attending church with the Methodists. Mrs. Sarah Macy is Methodist, and when we discussed it in 1999 she told me there were about thirty or forty members at her church. The Scott Methodist Church building is a historic site, and is one of the oldest structures in Sweetwater. Dr. Scott was recognized as one of the most prominent early citizens of Sweetwater. When I visited Miss Sarah a few weeks ago, she told me that their congregation is down to seven members, all women. A pastor drives over from Little Rock every Sunday to perform their service.

Observations on Sweetwater Baptist Church

Gone are the days of lakeside baptizing. Gone are the days of steamy tent revivals on hot summer nights, burning with the spirit, cooling oneself with a cardboard fan. Yet, in a tiny town in the south Arkansas Delta near the waters of the Mississippi River, “The Big Church” endures. The town is home to 2819 citizens, 393 of whom are white. Main Street is home to mostly empty store fronts showcasing dark, dusty interiors devoid of goods or services. On Sunday morning, the many black churches in town are making a great sound unto the Lord. The beautiful Presbyterian Church on South Archer

Street, only recently purchased by a black congregation who are readying it for use, has sat empty for years, filled with an absence of souls, its stained glass eyes gazing on no parishioners. But right next door, the bell rings to call to call to worship the people of Sweetwater Baptist Church, and still they come. With dedication, determination, and an eye for the future, still they come.

The church has played several roles in the life of my family. My parents were married there. The funerals of my most loved relatives have been held there. In the last year I sat in the front row at two funerals there within four months. When you sit in the front row at a funeral, it's not because you're lucky. I lost my grandmother, Mrs. Campbell, and then her sister Grace, Vivian's mother, only four months later. It is with this sense of connection and loss that I seek to give you this place.

The material setting of the church is complex, and it has changed much through time. In the beginning a small group of Baptists met in the W. H. Stephenson Store one Sunday a month. In 1904 a small one room frame building was completed at the corner of North Main at Hunter Street. The first building committee on record was appointed in 1922 to secure pledges to build a new, larger church. The new church was dedicated on September 7, 1924. The structure was beautiful, red brick with a Greek revival colonnade and four pillars. It is written in the Church History that the shadow of debt hung over the church for the next nineteen years. During the Depression the building was mortgaged, and threatened with foreclosure. The debt of the church was paid in full in 1942.

An educational annex was added on in 1955, and in 1957 the cornerstone was laid for the present structure. Today the old church, the educational annex, and the new

church are all connected as one structure. The church owns the entire city block on which the structures stand. The new church is markedly different architecturally from the old church. In the Church history book there is a drawing labeled “VISION.” The new vision of the church is a flat front pale brick structure with an A-shaped roof, and two sets of double doors set within an arch, topped by a rose window. The rose window was given as a memorial by my cousins, in honor of Vivian’s father and aunt. The sanctuary is filled with a dozen other full length stained glass windows, also given as memorials by various church members.

The inside of the sanctuary is quite large. The ceiling is very high, buttressed with thick beams. A balcony looks out from a second story. The entire sanctuary is painted a bright off-white, inlaid with a tan color in recessed areas. The carpet is a rich teal, and the cushions on the pews match this. Formerly, the carpet and cushions were a pale sea-foam green. Stoddard and Vivian recycled a few of the old pale green cushions and made seat cushions for the chairs at the kitchen table in their house.

The altar area of the church is pretty. Behind the podium to either side sit two wing back tapestry chairs. Behind these the choir sits. The baptistery is just behind the choir. Above the baptistery there is a beautiful stained glass scene of the River of Jordan, given as a memorial in memory of a loving wife. According to Wilson (1995), the River of Jordan is a very common scene for the baptismal art. These scenes offered colorful relief in plain, often stark church interiors. To the left and right of the River of Jordan there are organ pipes, installed within the last decade, at a cost of \$25,000. Every Sunday there is a beautiful flower arrangement sitting in front of the podium.

This pretty scene is relatively new. Wedding pictures from 1967 show the back wall of the sanctuary to be completely bare, but for a long curtain hiding the baptistery. Other pictures that I have seen show that the walls were still bare in the late 1970's. I think it is important to note that these very expensive cosmetic changes have taken place since the church membership began to drop in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Stoddard accounts for the loss by saying that when the Baby Boomers began to leave the Delta to go to college, they moved to the cities, and did not come back home.

At the time of its birth on November 23, 1902, the members of the Sweetwater Baptist church were among the more affluent people in town. When Stoddard and Vivian were first married, they joked that they couldn't go to church there. "Too many rich people, we didn't have good enough clothes to go to the Big Church." It was called the Big Church by people in town, some still call it so. "It is the Big Church," Stoddard says, "still is." It may not have a large congregation any more, but it still has a large presence.

The congregation today is listed at about 140 people, and usually seventy or so people attend services. The Big Church congregants are still among the most affluent in town and include mayors, town councilmen, businessmen, and farmers. On Easter Sunday, the numbers present may number well over one hundred. When I attended an Easter service a couple of years ago, two young men were pointed out to me who would drive home from college from Monticello, Arkansas, and Monroe, Louisiana, to attend Sunday church services with their families. I found that to be very impressive.

The majority of the congregation is elderly. Stoddard and Vivian said "We're a senior citizen congregation, not by our own choosing." At the time that I began my research, the church was without a minister. The congregation was hoping to find a

young man who could reach out to young couples in the community who did not attend church. Since I concluded my research of the church, the congregation has welcomed a new minister. He just happens to be the first cousin of Miss Sherri, one of my informants, who is originally from Hamburg, Arkansas. He is in his early fifties, a handsome, energetic man who the congregants seem quite pleased with. I only met him for a moment at my grandmother's funeral; he was very kind.

On one of my weekend trips to the Delta I arrived on a Saturday night. For four hours I drove along next to the levees of the Mississippi River. I pulled my car into the driveway of a very familiar house and went inside. They said "Our Baby is back," and told me to put my bags in "my room." As we sat down to supper my mama's cousin asked if I brought my church dress. This is the same question she has been asking me for my whole life, every time my family and I would come down to the Delta to visit my Grandma. "Yes," her husband answers, "of course she brought her church dress." And of course I had. Before it was time for bed on that Saturday night, I asked Vivian if we were going to Early or Late Church. She just laughed and said there is only one service and it would be at 11 o'clock.

I attended the Easter service in the spring of 1999. The congregation was still without a minister, at that time, so an ordained minister from Greenville, Mississippi, came to do the Easter service. He had come to Sweetwater to do a few services previously, and was well liked by the congregation. He was a mild man; he liked to tell stories, and was self-deprecating when his stories tended to go on for a long while.

The 1999 Easter service was not a sunrise service because the church does not have a sunrise service any more. They used to have them on the shores of Grand Lake.

Although they didn't have one this year, usually there is an Easter cantata, a group of specially prepared songs performed by the choir.

On this Easter Sunday, the podium was decorated with Easter lilies and boughs of white dogwood. A large, rough hewn wooden cross that stood about eight feet tall occupied the middle of the choir space. The cross was draped with purple and had a crown of thorns nailed to it at the top. Vivian said they used to have someone drag it down the main aisle during the service for effect, but this year it was already in place.

The service started, as every service starts, with the prelude. There is an organ to the left of the altar, and a baby grand piano to the right. The musicians are a brother and sister. The brother plays the organ and the sister plays the piano. They are both lifetime members of the church, maybe in their early forties.

After the prelude, there is a time of meditation. For the Easter service another lifetime church member sings "Rise Again." He sings this song every year; it is a tradition. "Go, ahead - drive the nails in my hand, laugh at me where you stand - I'll Rise Again..."

After the singing, a Deacon offered the welcome. Usually, the visitors are just asked to raise their hands, but since there were so many visitors for Easter, a church member was asked to stand up and introduce all of their family guests. This took quite a while and in many cases there were three or even four generations present. Much of the white population of Sweetwater is elderly. On holidays Sweetwater is still 'home' and as such it is the gathering place for families. This was the way of my family until my grandmother had to leave, and sitting in Church that Sunday I could see that for Easter weekend, at least, the population of Sweetwater was burgeoning. The holidays seem to

me to represent the last stand of the dying town. The merriment of Easter Egg hunts, visiting with family, and the promise of a good Sunday dinner was able to stave off the gloom of the town's economic and population decline.

Following the welcome, we sang "The Old Rugged Cross." The six member choir was dressed in robes of purple with green trim, which they only wear on special Sundays. Next was the offering. While the music is played low, the plates are passed through every hand. Most of the offering is given during Sunday school, and not during the actual service.

Following the offering came the Responsive Reading led by another Deacon. After the reading there was another time of meditation during which the Lord's Prayer was played quietly, but not spoken. Then followed the rousing hymn "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" - Alleluia! Following the hymn a choir member sang a solo piece. In a low, gravel-like voice, reminiscent of Johnny Cash, he sang "Were You There?" This particular man has been known to belt out "Amazing Grace" without provocation at different times in services, seemingly unconcerned if the congregation joins in or not.

Following "Were You There?" was the Easter sermon. Brother Jeff, from Greenville, Mississippi, is a relatively young man. In his early forties, scholarly looking, he began his sermon with a story about his little boy searching for eggs that morning. The theme of his sermon was "Wonderful." He discussed the word, wonderful, what it means to be a wonder. He said that Jesus was called by many names including, "the Lamb, the Lion, Lily of the Valley, Rose of Sharon, One Altogether Lovely, and Wonderful by Isaiah."

Brother Jeff mentioned the Seven Wonders of the World and said he would discuss the “Seven Wonders of Jesus.” The wonders were his birth, his life, his message, his love, his death, his resurrection, and the wonderful place he has gone to prepare for us - Heaven. Brother Jeff said, “Grandma’s house and her cooking is insignificant even to heaven.” However, I don’t believe that Brother Jeff ever ate my Grandma’s cooking.

The sermon was delivered in a conversational style. When Brother Jeff was discussing Jesus’ message he said it was “sharp.” “Sharp like a good Buck knife that can get all the way through an animal. Jesus’ message has to cut deep. The sharp message of salvation.” Richardson (1995), in describing the Southern Baptist sermon style, said that preachers will not seek to deliver a carefully crafted sermon. “How can one speak the words of God if one devotes all that attention to searching the dictionary for an elegant phrase? Form, written form, stands in opposition to sincerity. Today, even in upscale churches, with cushioned pews and stereophonic choirs, preachers, when they want to show they are truly inspired, cast aside the prepared text and revert to southern vernacular” (Richardson 1995: 20).

Following the sermon is the call for salvation. Those who are ready to commit or recommit are called to come forth. After the call Brother Jeff ended the service as he began it, on a bright note, by telling a story about why he likes hollow chocolate bunny rabbits. There was a final word of prayer and then announcements followed. After the service there was much mingling, talking, and clasping of hands as everyone visited. Easter is a special occasion, and all members were looking their very best. After engaging in after church visiting for a time, my family drove the two blocks back to Stoddard and Vivian’s house, where we feasted on Easter dinner.

A few weeks later I went back to church again. Brother Jeff was not officiating this time. There was a retired minister from Monticello, Arkansas. He was a big man, silver haired, and of ruddy complexion, like many of the men in the congregation. There was the usual prelude and Morning Prayer. This Sunday there was the welcome and the few visitors were simply asked to raise their hands. We sang the fellowship Hymn, “I Love You, Lord.”

The offering followed, and the Praise Hymn, “We Will Glorify.” There followed scripture readings, by a Deacon. The readings were from King David, on repentance. He said, “The bad thing about sin is that it breaks up your fellowship with God.” And he bade us good morning. The choir that morning was six ladies, and the same man: “If ever I loved thee, my Jesus ‘tis now.”

The visiting pastor’s sermon was about contentment and ambition. There is good ambition, to be pleasing to the Lord. Ambition is an important part of accomplishing things in life. Some ambitions are selfish, and some are holy. Paul was a very ambitious man; his ambition was to please God from the very beginning. Jesus’ ambition was also to please God. The Minister hoped that it would be our ambition to please God as well.

However, I learned that there are those who cannot please God, those who are “in the flesh.” Those whose lifestyle is determined by the flesh, not the spirit, are not pleasing to God. He said that Paul listed the needs of the flesh in Galatians; they include immorality, impurity, idolatry factions, drunkenness, and carousing. The sermon ended with a discourse on the importance of Faith. The service ended with a short prayer and the postlude. The structure of the service was the same as that of the Easter Service; I was assured that this is the typical structure.

Once I understood the structure of the services, Stoddard and I discussed two ordinances: baptismal and communion - The Lord's Supper. Stoddard was of the opinion that ordinances are sacred, and if you have them too often, you belie the sacredness. The church had not had the Lord's Supper since the previous November, before their last minister left. The former minister wanted to have the Lord's Supper once a month, and much of the congregation thought that this was too often.

The Lord's Supper is open to like believers in the Baptist faith, but closed to other denominations. The wine represents the blood of Christ, and the bread represents the body of Christ, but it is not felt that any literal transformation is made during the service. It is symbolic.

In order to participate in communion, one must be baptized. In order to be a Baptist, one must be baptized. However, one is not baptized until one is ready. When you are sure you have had an experience with God, then you let the church know you are ready to be baptized. Or if you have already been baptized, but you aren't sure if your early experience was pure enough, you can be baptized again. In this way, you can reaffirm your faith.

Baptismal is a public ceremony, held in the church. Formerly baptisms were held on the shores of Grand Lake, as were the Easter Sunrise services - always the lake, never the River. The River is too dangerous, its behavior too unpredictable.

Candidates for baptismal are dressed in ceremonial robes, and during baptism they are fully submerged in the baptistery. You do not have to be baptized to go to Heaven. And not only Baptists go to Heaven. Any believer can go to Heaven. Candidates for baptism can be of any age. Until you are baptized you cannot be a church

member, and you cannot vote on church business. However, Vivian was quick to say that unbaptized people are certainly very welcome to attend the church services. Sometimes it may take years for someone to be ready for baptism. I wanted to know if there was a term for a church goer who was not baptized. It seemed to me that person would be in a liminal space. Vivian and Stoddard, longtime members of Sweetwater Baptist Church, knew of no term for an unbaptized church-goer. My mama was baptized in the new church, and Stoddard and Vivian were baptized in the old church.

Other rite of passage Baptist ceremonies include weddings and funerals. There are some rules governing weddings at the Big Church. There is to be no alcohol. Either the bride or groom has to be a member of the church, or a close relation of a member. Songs must be of a religious nature- secular love songs are not appropriate. Sometimes the bride and groom write their own vows, but usually it is a traditional ceremony; the traditional vows include the word “obey.” I did not ask if both the bride and groom say “obey.”

There is no set structure for funerals. The ceremony depends on the desire of the family. Every funeral I have been to there has been for a member of my family. “Amazing Grace” has always been sung. The caskets have always been open as well. White people in town are buried at Mt. Carmel cemetery, and have been for over 100 years.

Although the congregation is at this point very small, the church offers a surprisingly wide variety of classes, programs and committees. There is no longer a youth group, per say, but there are a few young people, and they had a fine youth house across from the church that they use for church sponsored activities. The youth house

was a real house, a white wood frame house that the church bought in 1990. When I was in Sweetwater last I noticed that the lovely little house was gone. I was driving down the street and did a double take as I passed the empty lot. It was gone, every board, even the foundation. Stoddard said they were no longer using it, and they tried to give it away. They couldn't even give it away, so they knocked it down, burned what was left and bulldozed it away. Next time I drive through there will be only green grass on the spot. Even the gazebo is gone. The disappearance of the unused youth house shows how precious few youth are left in the church.

The church has nine Deacons, and no Deaconesses. Deacons must be elected and ordained by the church. Stoddard is one of the most senior Deacons, having been ordained in 1961. I did not know that about him before I began this project, and I am so terribly proud of him. There used to be a men's group called the Brotherhood, which was active for over 70 years. The Brotherhood was active in church and civic affairs, and spent much of their time establishing and building missions around the state. While the Brotherhood is no longer active, there are still men's prayer breakfasts, and Trustee and Elder groups in which the former members of the Brotherhood are active.

The women have the Women's Missionary Union, which is still active and has been since the 1920's. Twice a month, they visit area nursing homes. There are separate Sunday school classes for men and women, and Bible Study classes for men and women together. There is a separate church service every Sunday for children.

Church activities are organized by a number of committees, including the building committee, search, finance, hospitality, bereavement, transportation, flower, youth, and personnel committees. And, of course, there is the choir.

While the church was without a minister, a search committee was formed to find a new one. I discussed with Stoddard and Vivian what qualities they would like to see in their new Minister. They wanted a young, energetic man with the gospel in his heart. Youth is key here; the church wanted a young man to come in and re-energize the congregation. Youth is key, but, he would need to have some experience. They would prefer that he be southern, and have a family. A southerner would understand them; they didn't want someone to come in and try to make changes. Several of the former ministers were from nearby towns, practically hometown boys. They were hunters, fishermen, "like us, they knew how we felt, knew how to talk to the people." Members of the Big Church were comfortable with these pastors.

The minister of Sweetwater Baptist Church has a pretty good life. He gets a living allowance, car allowance, insurance, salary of upwards of \$50,000 a year, and a free house, which is two doors down from Stoddard and Vivian. The congregation likes to have the minister live about as well as the congregants do, and people live rather humbly in Sweetwater. Even the wealthiest people live in simple homes, with very little ostentation. According to Stoddard, "If you pay him too much, you get in trouble, if you pay him too little, he gets in trouble." For a church with such a small congregation, the life of their minister is one of relative ease, except for the funerals. For a church with an aging congregation in a dying town, there are a relatively large number of funerals to preside over.

It might seem like the future of the church is not so bright, but you would not get that feeling from any member. The congregation just finished outlining their Five Year Plan. They plan to witness to the lost in the community, and to be witnesses for Christ in

the community. They will continue to visit the sick and the lonely. The church has always been mission minded, and has supported many missions through the decades.

Just recently, the church has invested many thousands of dollars putting a new roof on the old church, and completely refurbishing and repainting both the old and new church, as well as the educational annex. This massive influx of money poured into the church does not signal a church in decline. The church is supported through love offerings of its members. That the current members give enough to keep the church alive shows great love to me. That they continue to invest thousands and thousands of dollars in the church shows both great love and great determination.

Another change in the church that the whole town has benefited from is the installation of a new set of bells (a carillon) in 1999. The money for the carillon was raised not only by the members of the Sweetwater Baptist Church, but by the community at large as well. The carillon cost over \$25,000 and the bells play on the hour every hour of the day. The carillon was installed in time to play for the Christmas service in 1999. The bells ring out over the landscape, signaling the church's strong presence in the town. You can hear them for miles. I have heard them from Vivian and Stoddard's back yard, my grandmother's house, the Mt. Carmel Cemetery, and I heard them while I was recently standing inside my grandparent's cement plant on the edge of town. The congregation is still pouring money into their beloved church, keeping their spiritual life vital and strong.

Chapter 6: Self-Sufficiency and Community Attachment

On Self-Sufficiency

Rural societies typically display a high level of self-sufficiency by making use of resources that are locally available (Hofferth and Iceland 1998). Using locally available resources ensures that the residents can take care of their needs without having to travel for goods, or seek help elsewhere. Self-sufficient people are independent and capable of taking care of themselves and their families. Self-sufficiency can manifest itself in many kinds of behaviors, from growing enough food in the family gardens to fill the family larders, to raising independent children not afraid to explore the world, to making homemade liquor. I have been impressed with the level of self-sufficiency that I have noticed in Delta people for most of my life.

The first and most obvious aspect of Delta self-sufficient activity grows in the huge family gardens: Stoddard and Vivian's garden in particular represents this behavior. Over the course of spring and summer they will harvest corn, potatoes, tomatoes, lima beans, black eyed peas, purple hulled peas, onions, peppers, okra, and sweet potatoes and any other vegetable you can name. Stoddard and Vivian's garden is very large. They grow enough that they can freeze the vegetables and eat them for the entire year. They provision themselves with vegetables for a year, every year.

Mrs. Sarah Macy said that one of the first things she had to learn about the Delta was how to freeze food. As she pointed out, there is only one grocery store in town, and the owner can charge pretty much whatever he wants. Most people in the Delta who can afford it will have a deep freeze which is stocked full of food to eat for the year. When

my grandfather was alive, he hunted game in every season, so my grandmother's deep freeze was not only full of vegetables, but also stored venison, duck, turkey, and fish. They would never go hungry, even if they couldn't afford to buy food. When my mama was a little girl, and money was very scarce, they still always had plenty to eat, because they knew how to provide food for themselves.

Provisioning the family larder is not something that only people of limited means engage in; it is common local practice. The rich land of the Delta offers up an abundance of food, one need only plant the seeds. Social relations sow the seeds across the community: even after my grandfather's death, the freezer at Mrs. Campbell's house was always stocked with food, because when neighbors grow more than they can use, they share it. Stoddard and Vivian kept her in black eyed peas and catfish, and our family dinners were all the more delicious because of them.

I cannot speak for the universality of the Delta, but I can say that all of the men that I have known well would qualify as jacks-of-all-trades. My grandfather and all of his brothers, Stoddard, Mrs. Helen Rutledge's husband, Mrs. Sarah Macy's husband, each of the men who worked at the concrete plant—all these men could fix anything. They could buy an old car and keep it running for years. They could build houses, and they did. They could see to the upkeep of property for their widowed friends. Delta men learned skills useful in everyday life. I don't know very many men my age who can fix things. Those of us who grew up in cities are used to having a range of services available to us at any time. I admire the self-sufficiency of Delta people. I admire the fact that they can rely on themselves for so many of their needs and not have to search for someone to

help them. Outside help can be hard to find, it can be expensive, and in rural areas, it may be altogether unavailable.

I learned about my grandparent's self-sufficient nature in business by comparing their concrete business with one owned by the grandfather of one of my friends in Little Rock. The plant, as it was typically called, was in many ways the hub of Mrs. Campbell's and Harl's lives. Mrs. Campbell ran the business side of things, and Harl oversaw the fieldwork. The plant operation was huge, and it was entirely self-sufficient. I didn't realize the scope of their self-sufficiency until I was able to compare their business with my friend's grandfather's concrete business. I remarked, "Wasn't it the most fun to play on the huge piles of sand and gravel?" I gushed on about how the gravel my grandparents used consisted of rocks dredged out of the Mississippi River, and it always had the neatest fossils in it. My brother Sammy and I used to climb on the batch plant and play in the ditch where the mixing trucks would dump out their cement water. We'd get in trouble because when we'd get out of the water, the cement residue from the water would dry on our feet. Then we'd have to stay in the plant for the rest of the day and play on the back hoes and front-end loaders, or in the garage.

She just looked at me and said that her grandfather's business didn't have a plant, or cement trucks, or piles of sand and gravel, or back hoes, or front-end loaders. His company sub-contracted out their equipment, and provided the labor. The end result of the job would be the same, but I was very proud and impressed with the variety of tasks that Mrs. Campbell and Harl were able to oversee. They were unwilling to be at the mercy of another company, not knowing if equipment would arrive on time, or if there would be a problem with materials being unavailable. They owned everything they

needed to do every part of the job. They even had a gas pump on the premises to fuel all of their equipment, as well as their own vehicles.

A second aspect of self-sufficiency that I would like to discuss is what I call the freedom to roam. Margaret Jones Bolsterli (2000) describes this by saying, “Equal in importance to the literal space we grew up in was the tremendous amount of figurative space that was allowed us; there was no concerted effort to keep up with anybody. If I chose to disappear for a few hours, I knew a search would not be in progress when I turned up” (26).

As a child Donna liked to roam. She liked to explore. I asked her what her mother was doing whenever she would slip away, and she said cleaning, washing clothes, cooking. Mrs. Campbell had a washing machine that she kept outside on the porch and she had to feed the clothes through a ringer, which was hot, exhausting work. It was easy for Donna to slip away unnoticed, and she did frequently, even as a tiny child. And while she did not have permission to be gone, her mother was never unduly worried. She was never scared that Donna had come to harm. When she did get home, Donna would be met with a quick spanking, which she considered fair payment for her adventure. She laughed and told me that she got spanked about every day of her childhood.

One time, when she couldn’t have been more than four years old because they hadn’t moved to the house on Cashion yet, Donna decided she wanted to go to school to see Charles. Having gone with her mother to parent-teacher conferences, she knew where his classroom was. So she went to school, which was about a mile from their house, found Charles in his classroom, and proceeded to squeeze into his desk with him.

Charles, at twelve years old, was mortified, but only slightly, because he had come to expect this type of thing from Donna, and he asked the teacher if he could go to the office and call his mother to come get her. The teacher said, “Maybe your mother knows she’s here.” “She doesn’t know she’s here,” Charles said. “How can you know that?” she asked. And Charles replied, “My mother doesn’t know she’s here because her dress is dirty.”

Charles called his mother and she started walking toward the school, and Charles took Donna by the hand and started walking toward their mother. When they met half way, Donna received her requisite spanking, and walked back home with her mother. She considered it a grand adventure.

When she was a little bit older, Donna befriended their neighbor, Miss Sally. Donna dearly loved Miss Sally. She wasn’t like the crotchety neighbor that yells at you if your ball goes in her yard. Miss Sally welcomed Donna every day, and let her pick bouquets of flowers from her beautiful gardens. Some of Donna’s sweetest stories from her childhood are about her afternoons with Miss Sally.

As a child who was raised by a woman with the freedom to roam as a child, I grew up with a good bit of figurative space of my own. Whenever my brother and I were in the Delta, we roamed totally free. We were allowed access to the petty cash box, and it was nothing for us to walk the mile or so downtown to buy candy, or stop by to see Aunt Lil. The graveyard across the street from my grandparent’s house was a favorite spot for me always. I would first find all of the Campbells and Barnes, and then I would visit the graves that I considered interesting. I liked the ones with unique epitaphs or

individual pictures. I would try to figure out how people had died and make up stories about them.

One day in particular, when I was six and my brother was eight, we wanted very much to get into a pasture at the end of my grandparent's road. There were cows there that we thought were worth seeing. To get to the pasture, we had to climb through a barbed wire fence and a culvert. I went through the fence first and ran through the culvert out into the pasture. It took me a minute to realize that Sammy wasn't right behind me, and then I heard him screaming, and a horrible buzzing sound. There had been bee boxes just inside the culvert. Sammy had gotten his shirt snagged on the barbed wire, and while he was struggling to free himself he had knocked a bee box, and he was swarmed.

He was already running, and I started running through the pasture trying to keep up with him. I could tell where he was because I could hear the bees. When we got back to my grandparent's house Sammy had bee stings all over his body. Grandma and Granddaddy threw us into the car and sped to the closest hospital, which was nineteen miles away. Sammy was treated for his bee stings, and given a Twix bar. I did not get a Twix bar, but neither did I get a spanking. Grandma had mellowed by this time, so I never got spankings. When we got back home, Sammy got to lie on the couch and receive special treatment, because had he been allergic to bees he could have died, and I was sent back outside to play.

Sammy and I grew up in Little Rock, and even there we were allowed a level of freedom that many of our friends did not have. Our house backed up to woods, and we had the run of those woods. We were told not to go off our street, but the woods went on

for miles. We lived on Five Mile Creek, and one day we followed its whole length, watching the process of one of Sammy's G.I. Joe action figures that we had given a burial at sea. Mama never worried too much about where we were, since we were always home on time, and nothing ever happened to us. As a result of this, neither of us has ever been afraid to explore. Sammy is supremely confident about finding his way through large cities, and has no problem traveling alone. If someone doesn't want to go where he wants to go, then he will by God go by himself. I have friends who can not even go to the grocery store by themselves. Sammy and I are both independent adventurers, as a result of our raising. Our mother was the same; even as a very young child she knew where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do, and she went and she did. She has never been daunted by a challenge. She will calmly brainstorm, and figure out a way to fix any situation. She doesn't give up, and she doesn't back down. This legacy of independent self-confidence is one that she has passed on to my brother and to me.

I discussed the idea of self-sufficient behavior spawned by freedom as a child with my mother, Miss Sherri, and Miss Ibbey one afternoon when we all got together to talk. Once we started talking, the stories started pouring out about how they played when they were little - outside, with the freedom to roam around - and how they behave as adults. Both Mama and Miss Ibbey talked about driving in large cities. When Mama goes to a city she wants to see the whole city. Even if she's never been there before she'll dive right in and go up and down. She never considers herself lost, since she is confident that she will find her way out eventually. She would never stay in her hotel room, scared to get out just because she's unfamiliar with the terrain.

Miss Ibby told of similar times. Her husband has had an office in Memphis for years, and still he knows little of Memphis other than how to get to his office. When Miss Ibby goes to Memphis, she goes to Memphis. She drove around that city until she learned it like the back of her hand. After Miss Ibby graduated high school, she attended a girl's college in Atlanta. On the weekends she and her friends would take the car and go exploring through every part of the town, and Miss Ibby would drive. She never experienced trepidation, only a sense of adventure.

The third aspect of Delta self-sufficiency that I would like to discuss is liquor. Despite the strong presence of evangelical Protestantism in the region, the Delta historically has been a hotbed of bootlegging activity. According to Gatewood (1993), once the temperance forces in America succeeded in enacting prohibition early in the twentieth century, the answer to the legal ban on alcoholic beverages was a proliferation of bootleggers who supplied large numbers of unlicensed saloons with liquor. In the Delta, these saloons were known as "blind tigers." Throughout Prohibition, the Delta remained a stronghold of opposition to temperance forces in Arkansas. Today, much of Arkansas, governed by staunch conservatives, is "dry," meaning no liquor can be sold legally within the borders of the dry counties. Many of the "wet" counties in the state today are in the Delta.

Much of the liquor consumed in the Delta was homemade. One interesting facet of Delta whiskey production is that the underground industry stayed in business long after Prohibition had been repealed (Hubbell 1993). According to Hubbell, whiskey making in the Delta was at its peak in the 1930's. Prohibition was repealed in 1933 (Clark 2003), but according to Stoddard, whiskey making and selling in the Delta went

on until the outbreak of World War II, when other types of jobs became available.

Apparently, the making and selling of whiskey provided employment in a region where money was tough to come by.

It was not until recently that I knew my family had a part in this history. Stoddard told me a story which he said was told to him by my own granddaddy. It seems that Pa Barnes, who was my grandmother's father, was a whiskey producer, and along with some other men from the community, he employed his sons-in-law to deliver whiskey for him. It was something of a family affair.

Apparently my own granddaddy had a model B Ford, customized for his bootlegging enterprise. In the trunk he kept a fifty gallon drum and a siphon. He told Stoddard that he used to make whiskey deliveries for Pa Barnes all over the Delta. He would pull up and people would tell them how many gallons they wanted, and that's what he siphoned out. He and my grandmother married in 1935, so he would have started this enterprise well after the repeal of Prohibition.

According to Stoddard and Vivian, whiskey making was a common occupation in the Delta, and the practice did not reflect badly on the practitioners. Lot's of people did it, they told me. When Vivian was a child, her family lived out on the Boeff River (pronounced Beff). She said that she could remember seeing everybody's stills set up out in the slough. A slough is formed when an oxbow lake becomes so choked up with cypress, lotus, and tupelo trees that there is very little open water left, and the lake is reduced to a narrow channel (Foti 1993).

However, the fact that many people manufactured and sold whiskey did not make it legal, and occasionally there were consequences. Much of the Barnes family liquor

was buried in drums in the potato patch. The men would take long steel rods and probe the ground until they found a drum and then dig it up. One day all the men were going into town except for Hubert, who was the brother of one of the sons-in-law. They all told Hubert, “don’t sell anything while we’re gone.” Later that afternoon two really “slick looking fellows” came to call. They were dressed up to go out on the town, and were wearing fancy straw hats. They said to Hubert, “We hear y’all make the finest whiskey around.” Herbert said, “Yeah, I expect we do.” They asked if he had any to sell, and he said, “No, not today.” The men seemed disappointed and they said, “Well now, that’s a real shame because we were looking to buy twenty gallons.” Apparently this was a very good sale and Hubert could not bring himself to ignore such a boon. So Hubert grabbed a rod and started probing the potato patch. When he dug a drum of whiskey out of the ground, he was promptly arrested by those two slick fellows. It was not a good day for Hubert.

On Community Attachment

According to Gatewood’s description of the Delta (1993), “Virtually all of the usual indices, from per capita income, unemployment, and housing to health, teenage pregnancies, and school dropouts, provide a statistical portrait of a people in distress. The once flourishing towns, with few exceptions, bear all the earmarks of places that have seen better times” (23). Despite the tyranny of indices, the white residents of Sweetwater still show a level of community attachment that is characteristic of village life. According to Critchfield, “The village remains the fixed point by which a man or woman knows his or her own position in the world and relationship with all humanity; from childhood on, a villager forms an inner picture in his mind of his own place, his

relationship with others in the village and the world outside, all securely balanced so that he feels a sense of being bound to a community whose common and familiar tasks and values go on forever” (1991: 344). Although he was not describing the Arkansas Delta, his remarks are entirely pertinent to life in Sweetwater.

With the exception of Mrs. Sarah Macy, all of my participants are very happy living in Sweetwater. Although Miss Sarah is not ready to move yet, she feels she will be at some point. Her husband was a native to the Delta, but she is not, and soon she may move to live closer to her children. Stoddard and Vivian plan on staying right where they are. Their sons have all tried to get them to leave the Delta, but they have no intention of doing so. “This is home,” they say. “This is home,” says Mrs. Helen Rutledge. “We love it because it is home.”

Mrs. Campbell demonstrated a very high level of community attachment. We always knew she loved the Delta, but we didn’t know how deep her roots went until we took her out of it. Liu (et al.) stated that the length of residence has a “significant and exceptional influence” on both friendships and levels of community attachment (1998:445). While conducting surveys to determine levels of community attachment, Liu and her colleagues used a one to five scale to rate levels of satisfaction. A person would be asked to suppose that for some reason they would have to move away from their community, and how pleased or sorry would they be to leave on a scale from one to five, with one being very pleased to leave and five being very sorry to leave (1998). This would be in the realm of the rational. After the fall-out surrounding Mrs. Campbell’s exit from the Delta I figure her score would have been about a ninety-five. To say that she was disappointed to leave the Delta would be putting it mildly. According to Filkins

(2000), women were more likely than men to report higher community satisfaction scores.

Mrs. Campbell was more than disappointed to leave the Delta. It would be more accurate to say that she blamed her children vehemently for removing her from her home, and that she plotted vengeance against them for the remaining seven years of her life. She used to draw herself up into the corner of her bed at the nursing home in Lonoke, near Little Rock, like a tiny cobra and explode with “Why did you bring me here? Why didn’t you just throw me into the Mi’ssippi River?” On one of her trips to the hospital she threatened Donna and Charles, “If you don’t take me home to Sweetwater I am going to get out of this bed and jump out the window!” Charles replied mildly, “Go ahead Mother, you’re on the seventh floor.” His comment was humorous only because his mother couldn’t see, and she hadn’t walked voluntarily in several years. Mrs. Campbell became well known for her three a.m. phone calls to her children over the next seven years, always with the same theme: “Take me home.”

She only ever talked of home. Later, despite or because of her blindness, she began to have visions. She declared that God’s mansion was in Sweetwater, and that she herself was God’s Princess. In that Mrs. Campbell had never been overtly religious, this talk of God took me by surprise. I found it very interesting though, because it gave added authority to her comments. She would say, “God said I need to go home today.” It’s pretty hard to argue with God. I’m sure, being a very smart woman, that she articulated God’s authority strategically. In addition to God, there was another person connected to the Delta who would “visit” her, but this visitor had a much more sinister aspect.

I would say, “How are you today Grandma?” And she would answer, “Oh, I’m all right honey, except for that ole Mi’sippi woman was here again today. The “ole Mi’sippi woman” wanted to take my grandmother on a ride, and she worried that she would take Sissy too, because, “they say it’s a ride you don’t come back from.” For some reason that we could never determine, the angel of death had taken on the personage of the “ole Mi’sippi woman.”

When Mrs. Campbell did finally go on that ride, she went kicking and screaming. She went into the hospital on a Tuesday night, and lost consciousness on a Thursday. She did not slip away, however, until the following Monday morning. She ultimately died of suffocation. She had emphysema, and once she became unconscious, she was breathing so shallowly that she was not exchanging carbon dioxide for fresh oxygen, so the carbon dioxide levels were slowly building up in her blood. We had to keep an oxygen mask on her at all times in order to keep her breathing. She hated that mask. She hated it and did not want it and even when she was unconscious, her little hands would dart up like tiny claws and pull the mask off her face given the slightest opportunity. So we all took turns holding her hands down and holding the mask on.

Fighting to the end, she finally went home. She sleeps at the Mt. Carmel cemetery right across the street from her little white house. We dressed her in her favorite pink dress, and bought her a beautiful casket in a color called “desert rose,” and my mama ordered every pink rose in the Delta to be placed on top of it. “Lots,” she said to the hapless florist, “I want lots, do you understand - lots, of pink roses – and no carnations, and I don’t care how much it costs.” It cost lots, and it was beautiful.

The last time Mama and I were in the little white house was September 19, 2002. We spent a horrible afternoon dragging everything out of the attic of Mrs. Campbell's house, what was left after all the times the house had been robbed since we had taken Mrs. Campbell and Sissy from the Delta. I swept the inside of the house, and Mama used a roll of paper towels and a bottle of 409 to clean the kitchen counter, cabinets, and the refrigerator. We just couldn't stand for it to be dirty.

After we finished cleaning the house, leaving piles of old feather mattresses and decades of clothing out by the road for passers-by and the city sanitation department to collect; we drove over to the cemetery. Over the summer, the mound of dirt over her grave had flattened and melted in a pool over the gravestone. We couldn't stand for that to be dirty either. With our bare hands we began scraping mud off of the stone, and ripping away the grassy weeds that were growing over it. We scraped the mud with our hands, our shoes, and even the ugly silk flowers that had been perched haphazardly near the grave for almost a year. When the flowers began to shred and fall apart Mama marched over and hurled them into the woods at the edge of the gravesite. I had to laugh. Here we were kicking and scraping at this grave like crazy women clothed in dust and mud, and then she goes and litters in the woods. It wasn't like her at all, but she was worked up.

It may have been the silk flowers. It is her, and my, opinion that when someone dies, it is impolite to buy silk flowers. They are the most inexpensive of all funeral arrangements. Fresh flowers may be expensive, but they are beautiful, and better that they die in a few weeks than stay around until the end of the earth, with faded, scraggly blooms on bleached plastic stems.

Apparently the engraver had been by at some point over the summer. “November 26, 2001” was newly engraved on the stone, and the color of the exposed stone was pale; it looked raw next to the rest of the engraving that had been done in 1982 after my grandfather’s death, which had colored to a dark gray over time. We left the grave looking much better than we found it.

On Community Dis-attachment

My mother, Miss Ibbey, and Miss Sherri all belong to the generation of children that left the Delta after college. All of Stoddard and Vivian’s sons have left, as have Lil’s sons, and all three of Mrs. Sarah Macy’s children. Mrs. Helen Rutledge’s son and his family still live in the Delta because they farm, and they make their living from the Delta land.

According to Brown, Xu, and Toth (1998), the population of the Delta is declining principally through the out-migration of the middle class, creating a “brain drain” in the culture. Lyson, in Brown, Xu, and Toth, noted that the Mississippi Delta has witnessed a large out-migration of its most intelligent youthful residents. Stoddard says the baby-boomers went off to college and didn’t come back. Filkins, Allen, and Cordes’ (2000) research supports this claim. While it is true that as a person ages he/she may become more satisfied with their community, at the same time as the education level increases, the young become less satisfied with their community. Filkins (et al.) suggests that perhaps the expectations of those with higher levels of education are so high, that they can not be met within the dimensions of the small community. So as the parents were settling into old age contented to live in Sweetwater, the children were all scattering to the larger cities to make a living.

I find the stories of my mother, Miss Sherri, and Miss Ibbey particularly interesting. My mama went off to the University of Arkansas, which at that time was a good day's drive from Sweetwater. She fell in love with a northeastern boy, and she hoped to move to the northeast. But it just so happened that the small town atmosphere of Sweetwater was just what my daddy had been looking for, so, in a strange twist of fate, my parents moved back to Sweetwater for a few years after they graduated from college. My grandfather had a heart attack, and he and my grandmother needed help from my parents for a time. My parents taught school in Sweetwater, and helped my grandparents at the plant.

However, this did not last long, and before I was born, my parents moved to Little Rock. My father began to work for the State Police, and my mother earned her Master's degree in gifted education. She got in on the very ground floor of gifted education in Arkansas, which was new and exciting, and she has continued to fight for education for the gifted ever since. When they left Sweetwater my mother left the Baptist church. I was raised as an Episcopalian, but a relaxed one to my mother's inclination.

Miss Sherri left the Delta to go to Arkansas Teacher's college in Conway. She met her husband Mr. Rudy there, and although they had both been raised in Arkansas, came from different worlds. Mr. Rudy is from Hot Springs, which is one of the nation's original resort towns. Blessed with hot spring water, and nestled in the Ouachita Mountains, Hot Springs is a cosmopolitan town boasting historic bath houses, art galleries, theaters, hotels, and the Oaklawn horse race track. Even though gambling is illegal in the rest of the state, it has always played a part in the history of Hot Springs. Local legend has it that in the thirties, mobsters from New York and Chicago would bring

their families down to Hot Springs for a little fun and gambling. Hot Springs was said to be neutral ground, so there was no fighting.

Miss Sherri grew up in Hamburg, which was the county seat and had more of an influx of people from the surrounding county than did Sweetwater, which was geographically isolated and bordered by the Mississippi River to the East, and Louisiana to the south. However, Hamburg is also still a traditional Delta town, and a far cry from the cosmopolitan lifestyle of Hot Springs. Mr. Rudy liked the Delta, and I've already mentioned that he finds the fishing there divine. There was, however, the question of religion.

Miss Sherri, like my mother, had been raised Baptist. The first time Mr. Rudy went to church with Miss Sherri in Hamburg, the sermon was on the evil of gambling. For a man from Hot Springs this was simply too much. Miss Sherri and Mr. Rudy realized they were going to have to find a compromise. The compromise ended up being the Lutheran Church, where they have been happily and deeply involved for decades. They have made their home in Little Rock since their marriage, where Miss Sherri was a teacher, and Mr. Rudy worked in business.

Miss Ibby has a similar story. Having grown up in the Mississippi Delta, she went originally to Atlanta for college, and then attended Louisiana State University. Her parents were Baptist and Methodist, and she had been raised in both churches. Miss Ibby met her husband at LSU, and he was Catholic. Now, my mama married a Yankee, and Miss Sherri married a man from Hot Springs, but Miss Ibby married a Catholic! There was a great distrust on the part of Delta people of Catholics. They were seen as very much a people apart, belonging to another, totally separate culture. Miss Ibby's

grandmother felt compelled to call the parents of Miss Ibbey's prospective husband and let it be known how much she disapproved of "the match."

However, the young couple persevered and found themselves in Little Rock where Miss Ibbey taught school, and her husband conducted his business. They ended up compromising on a religion as well, and joined the Lutheran Church.

Having three women with such similar backgrounds and such similar stories in my life, to me, constitutes a pattern. Patterns are interesting, especially when they are perpetuated. For instance, my mother's second husband of twenty years is also not of southern extraction. His parents are originally from Pennsylvania, but he never lived there. His father was in the military and Steve actually spent his childhood years overseas in Germany, and then attended junior high, high school, and college in Arkansas. Still, all those years in the South does not make him southern, as Mrs. Campbell was quick to point out. She asked Donna, a few years ago, if the next time she got married, would she please marry a southerner?

Chapter 7: Work

Willard Gatewood (1993:11) stated that for women, life in the Delta was a life of work. According to Payne (1993:136), the code of honor for Delta women is work; "...the true meaning of the Delta lady, be she rich or poor, black or white, was that she should perform a staggering amount of work, give birth every two years, nurse the sick, care for the dying, make it look easy, and never complain." Delta women take constant work for granted. A woman's work is never done, because the woman's work includes the maintenance of the household, regardless of whether she had additional work outside the home (Payne 1993).

Vivian

I have observed, over the course of my life, a prodigious amount of work on the part of my Delta women. Vivian is in her seventies, and I continue to observe that she works hard every day. Much of my fieldwork time in the last few years has been spent following Vivian around on her daily activities.

Typically I would spend a weekend with Stoddard and Vivian. As I have described, Stoddard would rise around 4:30 for his daily walk. Vivian would sleep a little bit longer, but not much. By the time I would wake up, usually around 7:30, they would have already been incredibly productive. At this point I would usually be teased about sleeping late. Stoddard and Vivian go to bed every night at 9:00. A few of the times I have stayed and we've been having a really good talk, they've stayed up longer, but most nights they retire right on schedule. I would stay up later and read. On my most recent trip I stayed up until only about 11:00, but I was very tired, and the weather was

cold, dark and rainy, so I was sleeping really well. I finally woke up at 9:00 in the morning when I heard Stoddard say from outside my bedroom door, “Do you reckon she’s died?”

The garden that Stoddard and Vivian keep is regarded by many as the best in town. It certainly sustains them. The bulk of our meals are provided by the garden. Vivian buys bread, milk, meat, and eggs at the store. Other than that, all of the vegetables they eat come straight from the garden in the summer and fall, and the rest will last the remainder of the year in the deep freeze. Vivian painstakingly goes through every butter bean in the garden, keeping only the smallest ones to eat. She calls the tiniest beans “golden nuggets” and they are only about the size of a pinky fingernail. They are so good; they burst on your tongue when you eat them. They grow corn, and Vivian creams it and then freezes it in bags. This is one of my favorite things to eat, and it’s their grandchildren’s favorite as well. Vivian saves a couple of bags of corn for Easter dinner, and that’s usually the last of it till summer.

In addition to butter beans and corn they grow potatoes, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, field peas, and other vegetables. They work in the garden in the mornings. By the time I wake up, they have usually been in the garden already. Or they have already completed their yard work. They have a neighbor who is a widow named Mrs. Holly, and often they work in her yard as well as their own.

In addition to doing their own and the neighbor’s yard work first thing in the morning, Vivian also already has the noon meal – dinner - cooked. In fact, she usually has cooked for the whole day. She cooks enough that the leftovers from dinner can be warmed up later that evening for supper. It will already be on the stove so all she has to

do is warm it up and make a cake of cornbread in the afternoon. All of this having been accomplished before I am even awake. I consider 7:30 to be fairly early, but it is not in country hours. Many times they will also have run to the grocery store.

For the rest of the morning, I follow Vivian through her various activities. We talk as she does laundry. We sit out in the yard with Stoddard. Sometimes we go for rides. Many times I will go and ride around town to pay visits on some of my grandmother and mother's friends such as Mrs. Sarah Macy, Mrs. Helen Rutledge, or Aunt Lil. I am careful to be back by noon, because meals are pretty punctual, and always good.

In addition to her own work, Vivian keeps busy with church activities. She serves on several committees, and is active in the Baptist Women's Missionary Union, as she has been for decades. There is a pattern of busyness to Vivian's life that is constant. Mid-morning she will sit down to watch "The Price is Right", and it's like a guilty pleasure. As soon as its over, she's off and gone again. She has a saying that she got from her grandmother, Mrs. Campbell's mother. As soon as she finishes doing the dishes from the previous meal, she'll look up and say, "It's time to cook and clean again, Little John."

The last time I was in town, I was out riding around with Aunt Lil until around supper time. I got back to Stoddard and Vivian's house right at five o'clock and as always, supper was ready. We had stewed chicken, baby lima beans, creamed corn and sliced tomatoes, four of my favorite foods. Vivian makes a fresh cake of cornbread for every meal, and after supper, Stoddard crumbles the leftover cornbread into a glass of

buttermilk. If there is a lot of cornbread left, Vivian saves the pieces in the freezer and uses them at Thanksgiving to make her cornbread dressing.

We talked about her dressing, and how she and Mrs. Campbell have different ways of making it. Every woman has her own special way to make cornbread dressing. Mrs. Campbell made oyster dressing and flavored it with poultry seasoning, hardboiled eggs, and some of the drippings poured off from the roasting turkey, as well as the juice from several cans of Joey oysters. Vivian's family preferred their dressing without oysters, and she does not use poultry seasoning, just salt and pepper, but she agrees that if it is not rich enough she'll pour some of the turkey drippings into it. My mother and I have spent a lot of time trying to replicate my grandma's oyster dressing, and though it may turnout good, it's not the same as hers. It will never be the same, because she was one of those women who cooked by taste rather than by recipe; so is Vivian. If you ever want to cook anything like these women all you can do is watch them closely and work on your memory.

Mrs. Helen Rutledge

Mrs. Helen Rutledge has known a life of work. She was orphaned by her parents at age twelve or thirteen and she had three younger siblings to raise. She married young, raised two sons of her own, and then she raised the children of her older son after he divorced. "Work?" she laughed, "I've never worked outside of the home, but I have worked all of my life."

Miss Helen and her family lived across the street from my mother's parents for many years. Her younger son Tommy was one of my mama's favorite playmates; even though he was younger than her, she loved him. Miss Helen said that some people

thought they were related because when she was younger, Donna would ride to school with her older son, and when she was old enough to drive (which was from eleven on up) she drove Tommy to school. While Donna was still in high school, the Rutledge family moved into a house about a quarter mile away. My grandfather helped them build it. Her back door looks out over some of their farmland. She likes to sit there with her big Siamese cat named “Ming” and watch the land and the birds.

Miss Helen’s husband was a farmer, and a very good one. He was able to amass a sizable land holding to constitute one of the most prosperous family-owned farms in Sweetwater. My grandfather would drive along the levee and point out where various families land was located. He could always tell where Rutledge land began, because Mr. Rutledge kept his crops so neat and straight. A passage from Sam Byrd reminds me of Miss Helen’s husband: “Her husband was straight and strong and his fields were the first to be plowed in the spring and his crops were the first to reach the markets” (1942:70).

Miss Helen has been widowed for many years now, her grandchildren are grown, and her daughter-in-law has taken over the role of the wife of a farmer. But Miss Helen is still busy. She goes and she goes. Last year she traded in her Cadillac for a Chevy Tahoe, and she roars that thing up and down the Delta highways, frequently going on trips to Greenville, Mississippi, and Little Rock. Recently she was stopped for speeding, and she said the policeman was even more surprised than she was.

In the last few years, Miss Helen has taken up a new hobby to keep herself busy. She quilts, and her work is absolutely exquisite. On our last visit she pulled out over twenty quilts and we passed the time looking at each of them. She has made quilts for all

of her grandchildren, and so much thought goes into each one. She saved scraps from their clothes over the years, and she incorporates them into each quilt.

I always enjoy my time with Miss Helen; she is so sweet, and so pretty. She smiles all the time, she's a joy for me to be around, especially because she was close to my family, and can tell me stories about them. Miss Helen and Miss Sarah are dear friends, and they talk every day. These two women are an invaluable treasure to me, because they give me a sense of history, and a perspective on Sweetwater that I would not otherwise have.

Lil

I have already told the story of how Lil came to be in Sweetwater. She married a farmer as well, a sweet handsome one. But she was not to be a stay-at-home wife. Lil worked as a bookkeeper at a lumber company until 1957 when her brother-in-law loaned her the money to start her own business. Lil said when she opened her women's clothing store she didn't know the first thing about selling a dress. She had to learn all that, and learn it she did. She has been open for over forty-five years now.

On opening day, Saturday, August 10, 1957, Dr. Anderson came in to look around Lil's store. She started the store on only ten thousand dollars which she used to buy such things as the display cases, shoes, accessories, not to mention advertising. This left precious little money to buy clothes. Can-can petticoats were the latest style, and Lil had bought plenty of them and little else. She had them all lined up around the front of the store, every color of the rainbow, swaying and butting against each other like fat colored hens. Dr. Anderson finished his tour around the store and came up to tell her, "Lillibelle, you'll never make it." Dr. Anderson is long gone, but Lil's is still there.

Lil has three children, two sons and a daughter. She raised those children while working six days a week with the help of a black woman named Mama Daisy. Lil and her family loved Mama Daisy dearly, and her help enabled Lil to work the hours she needed to make the store a success.

Lil only closes the store on Sundays. In the last few years she and her husband have moved into town. They used to live outside of town on a large piece of land that had to be mowed with a riding lawn mower, because it was too large to cut with a walking mower. Lil loved to mow that lawn. She would get up on Sundays and go outside when it was just getting hot. She would put a Coke in the freezer when she walked out the door, and when she finished with the yard, the Coke would be partially frozen, enough to be good and slushy. That was her downtime, her ritual, and she still dearly misses it.

Lil's is one of the principal landmarks in town. As time has gone on its store persona has given way to its importance as a social center. Lil is happy to be there still. She said that her goal for the store was for her to be able to educate her children. She certainly did that. Her daughter is a speech therapist, one son is a veterinarian, and her second son is the manager of a golf course. Lil's store has defined the pattern of her days for over forty years, and continues to do so.

Mrs. Campbell

Mrs. Campbell always worked. She loved her work. The success of their business was a point of pride for her and Harl. She ran the business and she ran the home. Her health did not begin to decline until she sold the business. Her work was so much a part of who she was that I don't think she made the best retiree. She had always

been so driven that I think it bored her to only have to take care of herself and Sissy, and to only cook for two.

She loved having company, because she loved having people to fuss over and feed. When we would arrive in the Delta for visits she would have enough food to feed an army. Many times on the way to our annual summer trips to Florida, my daddy would stop the car in Sweetwater at my grandma's house just to say hello. My daddy, step-mother, brother, two step-sisters and I would pile out of the car to stretch our legs, and she'd already be trying to feed us. She would also slip a folded twenty dollar bill in my and my brother's hands when we were hugging goodbye. She did this for my whole life, on every visit, as long as she was in the Delta. Into my mama's hand she'd slip a hundred dollar bill.

Running the Plant had filled her life, and her position as the Boss sustained her. Once the Plant was gone, there was not much left to fill her days. She was one of those women who needed to be busy all of the time. While she was still in the Delta, she at least had her house to take care of, and her yard. She still went outside every evening at dusk to sweep off the carport. She drove to the post office every day to get her mail, and she never missed an appointment at the Beauty Shop. She loved to go for rides on the levee, or anywhere else for that matter

Work had defined her life for so many years that when it was gone, she started to slowly decline. Once we had to take her out of the Delta, there was nothing more for her to do; all she had to do was look after Sissy, and that was second nature for her. I thought she might die from boredom, but I never thought it would have taken seven years. Her

days had changed from being defined by her work, to idleness that could only remind her of the loss of her work.

There was much that I learned from her. She was such a hard worker, and she thrived on it. She gracefully navigated her way through a male-dominated line of work, and was successful for many years. She worked the way she wanted to, and she lived the life she wanted to live on her own terms. To me, she is the quintessential Delta woman.

Chapter 8: Visiting, Care, and Reciprocity

Visiting

According to Payne (1993) the act of visiting defined the social life of women in the Delta, and it is the activity about which they expressed the most pleasure. The majority of my experiences in the Delta, both as a child and an adult have centered around visiting. Visiting constituted the bulk of my fieldwork and could even be considered my primary research method. Hubbell (1993) suggests that life in the Delta is characterized by both abundance and limitation. There is an abundance of natural resources, but a dearth of social outlets. Visiting offers a mode of entertainment within the limitations of the rural Delta environment.

Women are particularly known for visiting, but men visit just as much as women do, they just don't do it at Lil's or the Beauty Shop. Delta men hunt, and the act of hunting is only part of the experience; the hunt clubs provide the men with a sense of brotherhood and friendship (Hubbell 1993). Going to the deer woods is a great adventure, and despite the druthers of my grandfather, it is typically men only. Hubbell said that mixing talk and sport was the highlight of men's lives in the Delta (1993:186). The morning coffee breaks that I used to accompany my granddaddy on, the gatherings at the hardware store, the men's prayer breakfasts at the Sweetwater Baptist Church, and the gathering of neighborhood men in Stoddard's front yard are all examples of men's visiting.

When they lived across the street from each other, Mrs. Campbell and Mrs. Rutledge visited twice a day every day, once in the morning, and once in the afternoon,

after dinner but before supper. They would drink coffee and just relax. In the summer when the peas were in they would sit with a huge bowl of peas between them and shell peas for hours. Shelling peas is long work, but it has to be done, and it has to be kept up with so that the peas can be put up while they're good and fresh. "Weaving friendship with responsibility and integrating work with pleasure characterized the lives of Delta women" (Payne 1993:138).

When I was little, and my granddaddy was still alive, he and my grandma had a nice garden. It wasn't as large as Stoddard and Vivian's garden, but it was plenty big. They had lots of peas; the center of the garden would be filled with vines, growing up over the wooden stakes in a lush entwining wall of green. I learned to shell those peas as a little girl. Grandma and I would sit out on the side porch with a brown paper grocery bag of peas between us. We would each have a big bowl sitting on our laps, and as we would shell the peas, we'd fill the bowls with the fresh peas. Snap off the end, pull the string along the seam to the other end, spread open the pod, dump out the peas, throw the empty pod into another brown paper bag – over and over, for hours at a time. Later Grandma would portion them out and freeze them. I loved shelling peas - black eyed peas, field peas, purple hulled peas. I could shell as many as I wanted for as long as I wanted. There were always more. I learned that you do not shell the green beans. When the peas were not in season I used to shell the pods off of the mimosa trees. I would pluck them out of the thorny pink feathers of the mimosa bloom and shell the pods. I thought about eating a few of the tiny seeds but they didn't look so good, and they also made my fingers stink.

Sometimes while I was doing my research I would go along with Stoddard and Vivian when they would go visiting. Vivian's mother, my great-aunt Grace, was in a nursing home in Oak Grove, Louisiana, and we would go down to visit her. Grace was still very sharp, and she had a sharp tongue. She kept everyone around her jumping. But she would still smile her same smile and her eyes would twinkle when she said something funny. She was Mrs. Campbell's older sister, and she lived to the impressive age of 96.

Since Vivian knew several of the other residents at Oak Grove, she liked to peek in and say hello to them as well. On one of our visits, we stopped to talk to a gentleman sitting in a wheel chair. I assumed he lived there. He and Stoddard were talking about how his wife was doing. He said that she was doing better, so he was going to go home in a little while and mow the front yard. His wife lived there, but he didn't, though he came to see her every day. I guess he was just resting up in that wheelchair.

While we were talking, he commented that I was a pretty little thing and that I had really nice teeth and good hair. He then reached out and grabbed ahold of my leg, squeezing it and feeling the muscle. He pronounced me fit and sturdy. It turned out that he was a horseman; seems I was being judged as a piece of horseflesh. He smiled (leered) at me and chomped his teeth. I didn't know whether to be pleased or bothered.

One very important aspect of visiting is story telling. Over the years I have heard the same stories over and over, and I never tire of hearing them. Norrick (1997) states that the telling of familiar stories serves to foster group rapport, ratify group membership, and convey group values. When I know a story, or when a story is told about my family, it gives me a sense of belonging. Often the retelling of a familiar story provides the

opportunity to relive pleasant moments and enhance group rapport; it doesn't matter that there is no new point to make, and no new information to exchange (Norrick 1997). The phatic communion fostered by storytelling is far more important than any possible informational function. Storytelling is fun, and Delta people never run out of stories. Sometimes I'll sit and pepper Stoddard with questions while he's trying to watch television. He answers me, sometimes, but when he gets up and moves his chair to face me, that's when I know I'm in for it – a really good story telling session.

Care

Another aspect of visiting is care of the ill or the dying. According to Payne, "Virtually every diary and collection of letters written by a Delta woman, whether of wealthy or of modest background, contains constant reference to 'sitting up' with a very ill family member, neighbor, or friend. The ethos of Delta womanhood, black and white, demanded that no very sick person, and certainly no one dying, be left alone" (1993:132). This female imperative crossed racial lines, for women often kept sick watch over members of the other race.

When I first started to come to the Delta I learned that a woman named Miss Marie was dying from cancer. I was especially upset to learn this because she was one of the women I was particularly looking forward to working with. Her daughter had been a good friend to my mother in high school, and my grandmother had been friends with Miss Marie. I found out that Miss Marie was ill from talking to Lil because Lil was going over to Miss Marie's house after work to sit with her so that her husband could get out for a little while and go to the high school football game. It turns out that many women in town were taking shifts to sit with Miss Marie at that time, providing the

immediate family with a little bit of relief. Lil had also driven Miss Marie to Little Rock for doctor's appointments a few times.

Himes and Reidy (2000) found that when friends act as caregivers, they tend to provide care for shorter durations, and that the most common help that they will provide is transportation. The network of Sweetwater women could provide a steady stream of help to Marie's family, without any one person being unduly burdened. No one I spoke to saw it as a burden to sit with Marie. She was their friend, and they all loved her.

Himes and Reidy (2000) also found that friends are more likely to act as a caregiver when a health situation seems to have a clear termination point, meaning the care recipient will either die or get well. Frequently the care recipient is suffering from cancer. In the mid 1980's, Mrs. Campbell was diagnosed with breast cancer. She had a mastectomy, after which she went into complete remission. After her surgery, her cousin Mavis provided her day-to-day care until she was back on her feet. Mavis was a dear woman, and she and Mrs. Campbell were very fond of each other.

There are many widows in Sweetwater. Himes and Reidy (2000) suggested that women who are single have a greater chance of being a friend caregiver, as well as women who are older, and not currently working. While Lil does not fit this description, many of the other women in town who participated in the care of Marie do. The widows in Sweetwater have a close-knit network, and they provide company and care for each other.

Mama Daisy helped to raise Lil's children most of their young lives. When she and Lil were both getting older, Mama Daisy "got sugar" and had to have her leg amputated. Lil took her home and waited on her hand and foot for three months until she

was well enough to go to her own home. Lil said, “Mama Daisy took care of us for all of those years, the least I could do was take care of her.” When Lil first told me this story I thought Mama Daisy had died, but she didn’t, she healed and lived on.

Another aspect of visiting and care is the food that families bring when a family member dies. William D. Campbell, in Cobb (1999:134), cited the custom of bringing food to a bereaved family as evidence of the intertwined sense of place and community. “Somehow in rural, Southern culture, food is always the first thought of neighbors when there is trouble. That is something they can do and not feel uncomfortable. It is something they do not have to explain or discuss or feel self-conscious about. ...”

When my grandmother died and we took her back to the Delta for her funeral, the ladies from the Sweetwater asked if they could feed the family. I didn’t know what to expect, since Grandmother had not lived there in nearly a decade. What awaited us in the fellowship hall that day was a buffet three tables long that could have easily fed fifty people. Each woman is known for a specialty, and they were all represented. There were two hams, two kinds of sweet potato casserole, scalloped potatoes, broccoli and cheese casserole, salads, cakes, homemade rolls, green beans, and much more. It was such a sweet and unexpected outpouring of good will that I was stunned, and so touched. It also brought back memories of my granddaddy’s funeral in 1982. I only remember bits and pieces of that day. It was cold for April, and the church and gravesite were crowded, as was the house afterward. I remember there being covered dishes on all available surfaces, and lots of unfamiliar chairs in spots they didn’t belong.

Vivian’s mother Grace died just a few months after my grandmother. Instead of having a luncheon at the church, all the ladies brought food to Stoddard and Vivian’s

house. Once again I saw the generous display of food and care that had followed my grandmother's funeral. The provisioning of the feast is in fact planned, as the ladies get together and decide what they'll send over and when. They're quite organized in their caregiving and cooking.

Reciprocity

Tickamyer and Wood (1998) stated that there is informal activity in rural areas that is associated with long-standing traditions of barter, exchange, and self-provisioning. I believe that reciprocity is part of the Delta way of life associated with visiting. Payne (1993) noted that where visiting left off and borrowing and trading goods begins is impossible to define. As Delta women were frequently in and out of each others homes, they borrowed and swapped goods as an extension of being good neighbors and reliable friends.

I have noticed many occasions of reciprocity on my visits to the Delta. Stoddard and Vivian frequently do yard work for their neighbor. She always asks what she can do in return and Vivian just says to bring her a pound cake sometime. They have been doing this for years. Mrs. Holly will bring the cake, and she always says if it's not good to just throw it out in the yard.

When neighbors have an abundance of vegetables they'll pass them around. A couple of years ago Stoddard and Vivian had a really large crop of tomatoes, so every few days they would take a big basket up to the church for everyone to share. Stoddard always made sure that Mrs. Campbell had catfish in her freezer after Harl died. He didn't expect anything in return from her. Hofferth and Iceland (1998) have suggested that expectations of reciprocity are weaker among kin.

There are examples of reciprocity running through *Vinegar Pie and Chicken Bread*, the dairy of a Delta woman named Nannie Stillwell Jackson, edited by Margaret Jones Bolsterli (1982). Nannie's days are filled with accounts of visiting with her best friend Fannie, and trading goods with other women in their community. Nannie and Fannie had an extremely generalized sort of reciprocity, they did not keep accounts. However, some of the exchanges that Nannie made with other women in the community are very exact in their specific reciprocal expectations of return.

Referring to a gift from Fannie, Nannie said, "Fannie came this evening and brought me a bowl of black berries and oh they were so nice I just ate all I wanted gave the children some" (32). Again, "Mr. Jackson brought 8 hams Thursday evening and I cut one and fried some for supper and then he took the rest of that ham to Fannie" (64). With other women Nannie's exchanges were much more exact: "I paid Mrs. Chandler the dishpan of flour I owned her (32)...I let Mrs. Chandler have seven pounds of meat today, she is to pay it back on Wednesday" (33). Mrs. Chandler obviously was not as close to Nannie as Fannie was. This selective distance can also be seen in the difference in address forms: Nannie referred to Fannie by her given name, and referred to Mrs. Chandler by her title and last name. Nannie and Fannie saw each other and gave each other little treats nearly every day.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

For the moment I have come to the end of my story. For the moment only, I never want to truly finish because as long as I am telling the story of the Delta and the people I have known, they will live on. When I think that my time in the Delta is finished for now, that I have no pressing reason to travel, to visit, I am saddened beyond belief. I think of my grandmother's house sitting empty, and my granddaddy's sacred objects collecting dust in the shed. There have been many times over the last few years when I have thought, "this is the last time I'll be able to do this, this is the last time I can walk in this house," and every time I cry and become a little bit brittle inside. My grandmother's house was to have sold last year, but on closing day the buyer could not get a loan. I was gleeful; because I did not want that house sold. I want it to stand, because even though it is empty of people, it is full of the memories of my family. There have been no other offers to buy the house.

Sam Byrd describes sadness: "There is a sadness greater than homesickness: a sadness that comes of living alone in a great house after the echoes of loved ones' voices have drifted away on the wind. There's the sadness that comes of empty chairs and darkened rooms and the sadness that comes with remembering" (7). I can stand the sadness, and it helps to know that through my words others will be able to remember. Sad remembrance is infinitely preferable to nothingness. Dr. Richardson (1999) suggests that if it is true that "we are all bitched from the start," as Ernest Hemmingway stated, then it is our task to channel the hurt into the poetics of everyday life. "When we get the damned hurt, we must use it; we must be faithful to it. In so doing, we offer to

others the gift of our place in the story of being. And the hurt, which never leaves, may become something close to salvation” (Richardson 1999: 337).

I have written about the Arkansas Delta, and about the South, as well. I may always study the South. Carson McCullers once declared about her own work—expressing as a writer her personal sense of belonging—“The locale of my books might always be Southern....I hardly let characters speak unless they are Southern....This is particularly true of Southern writers because it is not their speech and the foliage, but their entire culture which makes it a homeland within a homeland” (Falasca 2000:119). I’ve tried to show the reader the Delta as I know it. I have tried to show the beauty in a region that is seldom described as such. McCullers described the South as “a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world” (Falasca 2000:120), and this description is apt for the Delta as well.

There is great beauty in Sweetwater. I did not want the town merely consigned to the category of small Delta towns described only as empty, sad, dying. I did not want it to remain unknown, as “...a sultry town rolled up around a dusty main street like a scar on the edge of an anonymous rural American South” (Falasca 2000:120).

In order to do my research, I went home, or at least I tried to go home. Sweetwater will never be as it was when my grandparents were alive, but it will always resonate with memories, shimmering in the heat of summer, blowing along with the cold winds of winter. I went home, and I had to give myself permission, as an ethnographer, to do so. In the words of Ruth Behar, I found a kindred soul with the same longings as mine: “Speaking for myself, the dream of my youth was to be a poet and writer, but first, I had to become an ethnographer. I became an ethnographer because I had lost my home

... and was drawn to anthropology, the discipline that invented fieldwork to give a name to its ceaseless wandering and search for home” (1999: 474).

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Vita

Susan Elizabeth Probasco was born July 24, 1975, in Little Rock, Arkansas. After graduating from Cabot High School in Cabot, Arkansas, in 1993, Susan attended Clemson University in South Carolina as both a National Merit Scholar and a Clemson Presidential Alumni Scholar. After graduating Magna Cum Laude from Clemson University in 1997 with a degree in psychology and anthropology minor, Susan began attending Louisiana State University in 1998. While at Louisiana State University, Susan pursued a Master of Arts with an emphasis on cultural anthropology. Susan spent four semesters completing her coursework and conducting field research in the Arkansas Delta. In the summer of 2000, Susan married her husband Robert, and the couple moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to live for a year before returning to Arkansas, at which point Susan completed her thesis. Susan will receive her Master of Arts degree from Louisiana State University in the summer of 2003, after which she plans to pursue a doctoral program.